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Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **406**

Yearbook 2015

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Hi-Fi+, October 2015

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Welcome

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BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS



EDITOR'S CHOICE:
Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance



RECOMMENDED:
Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance



GROUP TEST WINNER:
Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!



Welcome to the *Hi-Fi Choice* Yearbook 2015. Wow! What a 12 months it has been for discerning audio fans, as well as a milestone year for your favourite hi-fi magazine as we hit 40 years old and 400 issues back in August.

From vinyl's revival to on-demand streaming services able to deliver near-CD quality sound, the way we access music and the products we listen to it on has changed significantly over the last year. Inside this 164-page special edition you'll find our pick from the ultimate collection of the greatest-sounding audio products to undergo our respected reviewing process in 2015. From network music systems to turntables, and more loudspeaker models than you can shake a stick at, every product is a coveted *Hi-Fi Choice* badge winner applauded by our experts for its winning combination of outstanding sound quality and value for money.

Our seven-page *Music Reviews* section compiles the year's finest album releases to show off your system, plus we turn back the clock and look at what artists and stories defined our birth year back in 1975.

Lee Dunkley Editor

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Arcam

FMJ CDS27/A39

Famous for its mid-price hi-fi separates, Arcam has been winning awards for over 40 years. It has always delivered fine products, but the company seems to be enjoying a particularly purple period right now. The FMJ A39 (page 101) amplifier is one of them, but the new CDS27 CD player/streamer also looks promising.

The CD player as a breed is certainly on the wane, so what better way to make it relevant than to combine it with a network music player – giving all types of digital music playback from a single box? As well as offering

boasts a large toroidal power supply, acoustically damped chassis and a built-in moving magnet phono stage. Metal film resistors are used in the signal path, which have a much higher linearity than cheaper parts and careful attention has been paid in particular to the circuit board layout.

Its controls respond positively, and it has a wide range of (analogue) inputs and twin switched speaker outlets. Build and finish of both models is excellent, reflecting its higher price.

Sound quality

When originally tested back in September, the Arcam combo proved itself to be comfortably the best all-round performer. The amplifier has already been well reviewed and its talents are conspicuous here too; it sounds very powerful and gutsy, yet has a natural musical zeal that grips the listener and doesn't let go.

Coldplay's *Speed Of Sound* becomes an expansive piece of stadium rock that soars around the room; I sit on

The duo seems to penetrate beyond its forward balance and get into the groove

CD and SACD compatibility, it also streams music at up to 24-bit/192kHz resolution through its Burr-Brown DAC. Careful clocking is utilised, and extra special attention has been paid to the power supply with separate feeds for the drive mechanism, audio and DAC boards.

The FMJ A39 integrated amplifier is an interesting device, running in Class G; this mode of operation means that it works in near Class A up to around 20W, but then gives the cool running that's more commonly associated with Class AB at higher levels. It

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Arcam FMJ CDS27/A39

PRODUCT
£800/£1,500

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
CD player/streamer & integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
FMJ CDS27: 6.2kg
FMJ A39: 11.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD) FMJ CDS27: 433 x 87 x 278mm, FMJ A39: 433 x 100 x 425mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x 120W (8ohm)
• FMJ A39 inputs: 6x RCA line; 1x MM phono; Ethernet
• FMJ CDS27 DAC: Burr-Brown PCM1794 chip

DISTRIBUTOR
Arcam

WEBSITE
arcam.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 401

the edge of my sofa, gripped by its scale and visceral impact. Even the superb Exposure 2010S2 integrated (page 12) sounds surprisingly tame by comparison. The CDS27 is also a fine source, well able to capture the rhythmic nuances of UB40's *King*.

The Cocteau Twins' glorious *Lorelei* is the perfect track to reveal the true class of this combo; though it can sound shrill and shouty, the Arcam duo seems to penetrate beyond its superficially forward balance and get into the groove, really highlighting dynamic contrasts. It is incredibly insightful and nuanced, and one can focus on the subtle inflections in Liz Frazer's singing rather than trying to shy away from it.

Herbie Mann's *Summertime* floats as if on air; it is wonderfully expressive and the recorded acoustic seems vast with lots of space. One feels the sensation of really being there at the venue, and I find myself transfixed by the music. Tonally the Arcam combo is pleasingly rich and warm in the bass, but it also manages to conjure up a glorious glint to cymbals that so many of its rivals tend to lack. In short, it's in a class all of its own. **DP**



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Hugely powerful and lucid sound; flexibility; build; styling

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: No digital inputs on either amplifier or CD source

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: An excellent-sounding combination that's also very versatile

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Audiolab

8300A/8300CD

Sporting a new no-nonsense look, Audiolab's amplifier and CD player hope to impress when it comes to sonics

Launched in October 1983, Audiolab's original 8000A integrated amplifier was a veritable powerhouse by the standards of the day, with a quoted 50W RMS per channel into 8ohm that virtually doubled into 4ohm. Remarkably, unlike nearly all its rivals, the 8000A could even work into 2ohm loads without going bang. The model was extensively tweaked over the years and by the nineties had become a sort of hi-fi version of the Volkswagen Golf – affordable yet designed and engineered like no others at the price. It lived on for 14 years in its original incarnation, and the 8300A you see here is its latest descendant and arguably most radical departure. It has been substantially

redesigned inside by Jan Ertner, and can function either as an integrated, preamplifier or power amplifier.

The new version uses four bipolar output transistors per channel running in Class AB to give a claimed 75W per channel (into 8ohm, 105W into 4ohm). The designer says its power amp output stage uses a special complementary feedback topology for linearity and thermal stability, with the idle current kept independent of the temperature of the output transistors. Having the emitter follower deliver additional current only when needed means Audiolab's Active Current Drive system can be used, where a microprocessor controller lets the amp supply high currents ($\pm 15A$) into complex loads

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiolab 8300CD

PRICE
£1,000

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
CD Player/DAC

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
444 x 80 x 317mm

FEATURES
• DAC: ESS Sabre32 9018 chip
• Digital inputs: 2x coaxial; 2x optical; 1x USB; 1x AES/EBU

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Group Ltd

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 404

if need be. A 300VA toroidal transformer supplies the two mono amplifiers using separate secondary windings, followed by 2x 15,000uF reservoir capacity per channel (60000uF in total).

Topologically, the 8300A has been designed to keep the preamp section away from as much noise as possible. It sports a built-in phono stage that features MM and MC inputs. Also new is a fascia-mounted OLED display showing volume level, input selection, mode of operation and MM/MC phono setting. The rear has five line-level RCA inputs plus one balanced XLR. Two preamp outputs are fitted, along with a 12V trigger loop and bi-wireable binding posts.

The 8300CD CD player's lineage doesn't go back anywhere as far as its stablemate. It's a light rework of the 8200CD, which appeared in 2011. That's no bad thing, because it was an excellent machine at the price, and an extremely advanced design. It replaces both preamp-equipped and non preamp-equipped variants of its predecessor (the 8200CDP and 8200CD). It sports a new look and a slot-loading transport mechanism, along with the aforementioned full preamp functionality and an improved USB input (32-bit/384kHz rather than its predecessor's 24-bit/96kHz). It now offers DSD playback via USB



too; there are four extra filters for DSD playback (in addition to the seven filter settings for PCM files inherited from the 8200CD).

The new Audiolab 8300CD also has a balanced XLR analogue output, and AES/EBU digital in; the former is ideal for feeding the new XLR in on the 8300A. With its preamp functionality, you can now configure the 8300A as a power amp and drive it directly from the 8300CD. The latter has all of its predecessor's rear sockets, including two coaxial and optical digital inputs, upgraded asynchronous USB, single coaxial and optical digital outputs plus single-ended RCA outs and a 12V trigger loop. The fine aluminium finish is available in silver or black.

Sound quality

The 8200A was a well received amplifier four years ago, and still sounds very respectable now. As you might expect, it has a good deal of the 8000A's family sound – meaning a tight, taut, crisp character with powerful yet sinewy bass and a strong, well-defined soundstage. In truth, the 8300A doesn't divert far from this, bringing a little more power and a slightly more open and dynamic nature. It seems a little fresher and less introspective; if we're honest its predecessor could sound a little shut in and mechanical compared with the best of the rest, and there's less of that sense with this new machine.

I initially run it as an integrated amplifier partnered up to my reference dCS Debussy DAC, yet it doesn't sound particularly bothered by its exotic companion, serving up a powerful and lively rendition of The Kink's *Village Green Preservation Society*. This is a warm and soft recording with a lilting musical feel, and not something the 8200A would automatically sound good with, but it is unfazed and dives into the song with aplomb. You can certainly feel the family character; the 8300A is a long way from being as tonally fulsome as Arcam's FMJ A39 (page 7) for example, and won't flatter a poor recording. Rather, it gives a spry, detailed and 'matter of fact' rendition of what it is asked to play – but that doesn't mean it's boring. If the recording is poor it won't gild the lily so to speak, but still likes to get into the groove and power along the song. There's still that slight family 'dryness' that valve amp fans won't warm to, but this generation of Audiolab integrated clearly has a commanding nature that is obviously up for fun. The song certainly rolls along in a satisfyingly musical way.

Fed by its partnering 8300CD, I don't hear the drop in fidelity I anticipated. This is obviously a step or two down from the dCS DAC, but still doesn't embarrass itself. There's a sense that it's very detailed and intricate sounding, but like many digital sources using ESS Sabre DAC chips it has a slightly dry tonality that doesn't quite run the full spectrum of tonal colour. Still, in other respects you're quite unprepared for just how good it can sound. For example, Congo Ashanti's *Hail The World Of Jah* has a widescreen soundstage and hangs images back surprisingly deeply. Treble seems a little sweeter than its predecessor, and there doesn't seem to be quite as much noise across the midband; its predecessor could appear a little grey and hazy.

Indeed, the new CD player proves quite a surprise. Rhythmically it's not the snappiest of designs, preferring to give a solid, gently flowing sort of

This integrated amp has a commanding nature that is obviously up for fun

musical presentation rather than a frenziedly energetic one, but its appeal is undeniable. This machine has a confident, authoritative sound that's a good deal more svelte and composed than most of its rivals. Feed it some powerful eighties guitar rock, courtesy of The Smiths' *What Difference Does It Make?*, and this rather opaque and thin recording comes over with a surprising degree of smoothness and refinement, yet doesn't sound boring. Again, I am more than a little surprised by this as it seems to have gained subtlety and detail, yet has lost none of its predecessor's punch.

The unit works very well as a digital preamplifier too, with an excellent USB input that gives nothing away to any price rivals. Hi-res PCM via a MacBook Pro running Audirvana is highly enjoyable, the Audioblab bristling with energy and delivering a wonderfully expansive and polished rendition of Chic's *I Want Your Love* at 24/96. The 8300CD is better able to communicate the tonal flavour of the recording than its predecessor, with a fractionally richer and more weighty bass, a subtly less 'grey' midband and silkier treble. Yet despite this it remains satisfying in musical terms, ably showcasing the musicianship and its intricate, multi-layered mix. This album certainly isn't the smoothest

around and can sound a tad 'toppy' when played back on lesser digital sources, but the Audioblab remains a consummate smoothie throughout.

My experience is that this pairing works fractionally better with the 8300CD working as a preamplifier and the 8300A playing the role of a power amplifier, but it is subtle. Working in the conventional way, however, you can take advantage of its surprisingly capable phono stage. Joan Armatrading's *Love And Affection* on vinyl via my Michell GyroDec/Tecno Arm/Lyra turntable is a pleasure. It delivers a noise-free yet gutsy sound with a solid bass, clean and three-dimensional midband and smooth, refined treble. You will do better still if you invest in a good £500 phono stage, but the Audioblab's isn't there simply to tick boxes.

Conclusion

The 8300A is an excellent value integrated amplifier that's an ideal companion to its new CD player and also a fine-sounding product in its own right. Of the two, the 8300CD is the stellar performer, and surely the best-sounding silver disc spinner at the price right now. Not only this, but it is beautifully engineered and feels like the slick piece of design that it is. Both highly recommended, then! **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audioblab 8300A

PRICE
£900

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
7.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
444 x 80 x 330mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x 75W (8ohm)
• Inputs: 5x RCA; 1x balanced XLR; 1x MM/MC phono
• Outputs: speaker binding posts; RCA pre-outs

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Group Ltd

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE
audioblab.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 404

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT - CD

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Detailed, authoritative sound; smooth and sophisticated

DISLIKE: Dry tonality not to all tastes

WE SAY: Superb, class-leading CD player/preamplifier

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT - AMP

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Powerful, clean, detailed sound; facilities; build

DISLIKE: Some rivals are slightly more musically engaging

WE SAY: Excellent do-it-all mid-price integrated amp

The new 800 Series Diamond
didn't get better by chance.
It got better by change.
868 changes to be precise.

Bowers & Wilkins

bowers-wilkins.com





Cambridge CXC/CXA60

Few manufacturers have come to encapsulate the budget end of the hi-fi market quite like Cambridge Audio (as it used to be known). In the eighties it made exotic high-end kit, but reinvented itself in the early nineties with some superb affordable CD players and DACs, and since then it hasn't looked back. The products have traditionally been a little mundane looking, but they have consistently outperformed many price rivals. This new combo – sporting the new shortened 'Cambridge' monicker – attempts to keep that excellent sonic

The combo gives more detail than price rivals, but in a smoother way

pedigree, but go the extra mile in terms of styling. It's certainly a big step up from what we're used to from the brand, aesthetically. The CXC is a dedicated CD transport, and it pairs with the CXA60 amplifier.

The CXC is said to be optimised for audio CDs – an important point in a world of optical drives designed to read DVD-ROMs, adapted for hi-fi use, and uses the company's own special S3 servo, which is said to give very low jitter. The design is neat and it has an aluminium fascia and pressed steel case, damped to cut resonance. The

matching CXA60 surfs the zeitgeist of modern amps, sporting three digital inputs, plus a BT100 Bluetooth dongle (£70) – which feed the integral Wolfson WM8740 DAC chip running at up to 24-bit/192kHz resolution. It's a Class AB design pushing out a claimed 60W RMS per side via an Alps volume control, and has a low-flux toroidal transformer to help it along the way. Analogue inputs are standard too, of course, including a 3.5mm socket on the front.

Sound quality

Despite being only slightly more expensive than Yamaha's CD-N301/A-S701 CD player/amp combo that it went up against back in HFC 401, there's a step up in performance, and it's a considerable one at that. Fascinatingly, even hooking the Cambridge CD transport up to the Yamaha amplifier improves things noticeably, but when the Cambridge amp is added, the system really begins to soar.



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cambridge
CXC/CXA60

PRICE
£300/£500

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
CD player &
integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
CXC: 4.7kg
CXA60: 8.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD) CXC:
430 x 85 x 315mm,
CXA60:
430 x 115 x 341mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power:
2x 60W (8ohm)
• CXA60 inputs:
4x RCA line; 1x
3.5mm minijack;
coaxial; 2x Toslink;
USB
• CXC DAC: Wolfson
WM8740 chip

DISTRIBUTOR
Audio Partnership

WEBSITE
cambridgeaudio.
com

REVIEWED
HFC 401

Essentially, the sound is bigger, punchier and much more vibrant. The Yamaha is enjoyably smooth, but lacks a whole layer of dynamics; the percussion on UB40's *King* is dramatically more accented via the Cambridge, and you can hear rim shots jumping out of the mix that other cheaper designs miss. This all makes the music flow so much better, and come alive. Even vocals are discernibly better and more tuneful.

Moving to the brash but melodic sound of Cocteau Twins' *Lorelei*, the combo manages to give more detail than more affordable rivals, but in an altogether smoother way. Despite this, the texture of the instruments is far more realistic; you can hear the chiming sound of those early digital synthesisers better. The same goes for Coldplay's *Speed Of Sound*; this pairing seems able to unpick the mix and throw loads of detail out, yet it is smoother and more immersive too. The sound of Herbie Mann's flute finally rings true on *Summertime*, too. This is set against a far deeper and more spacious soundstage, with instruments located much more accurately in the recorded acoustic. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Propulsive, musical sound; fine styling; decent build; good facilities

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: This great-value combination punches way above its price point

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Exposure

2010S2 CD/2010S2D

As a brand, Exposure came to fame as a purveyor of high-end pre-power amplification back in the eighties, but launched its first integrated – the X – in 1988. Since then it has always been competitive in the mid-price sector, making a name for itself with its clean-sounding, punchy amplifiers. This combination is in the middle of Exposure's main range, and is definitely 'old school', devoid of features like UPnP streaming. Indeed the CD player could easily be a mid-nineties product in the way it looks and feels, although as

Combines all the good aspects of most rivals, but goes that bit further still

we'll discover, not the sound. The all-aluminium casework of this British designed and built product is good if not luxurious, but the CD mechanism feels a tad flimsy.

Inside, it's a different matter and Exposure has gone to town with a large toroidal transformer with separate windings for the mech and audio stages and a high-precision master clock. A single Burr-Brown 24-bit DAC chip is also fitted.

The matching 2010S2D integrated is the little brother of the acclaimed 3010S2D (HFC 397), and has lots in

common. Special cascode circuitry is used, with selected components in the signal path and discrete Toshiba power output transistors. A chunky 200VA custom-made toroidal power transformer is fitted, and together these make for a respectable 75W RMS per side. This neat amplifier is fairly minimalist in appearance and none the worse for it, with six analogue inputs including a tape monitor loop and an input that can be configured for moving magnet or moving coil phono stages if the optional £110 phono board is purchased. There's a preamp output too, making bi-wiring easy.

Sound quality

The Exposure combo pushes the music ahead still further. Right from the beginning of the listening session it is clear that it brings extra dimension to the music. It combines all the good aspects of most price rivals, but goes just that bit further still. Most obvious is its tonality;



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Exposure 2010S2 CD/2010S2D

PRICE
£830/£1,020
ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
CD player & integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
2010S2 CD: 5kg
2010S2D: 7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
2010S2 CD:
440 x 90 x 300mm
2010S2D:
440 x 90 x 310mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power:
2x 75W (8ohm)
• 2010S2D inputs:
6x RCA line ins
• 2010S2 CD DAC:
Burr-Brown chip

DISTRIBUTOR
Exposure
Electronics Ltd

WEBSITE
exposurehifi.com

REVIEWED
HFC 401

along with the Arcam FMJ CDS27/A39 (page 7), it proves itself to be an incredibly sumptuous-sounding duo. From the opening bars of UB40's *King*, the keyboard just sounds more vibrant, tactile and alive. It's better located within the recorded acoustic too, and so one doesn't pay much attention to the hi-fi aspects of the sound, so enjoyable is it to listen to.

Coldplay's *Speed Of Sound* also takes on an extra dimension. It sounds more anthemic, more uplifting and dramatic. Part of this is down to the excellent rhythmic gait of the combo, which pushes the song along with real verve along with the full-bodied tonality. Bass guitar has more thump and the piano sounds bigger and more impactful. The same goes for Herbie Mann's *Summertime*; although this pairing doesn't throw information out at you like the Musical Fidelity duo (opposite) it still gives a beautifully vibrant recorded acoustic, and this mixed with the creamy flute sound and superbly etched hi-hat makes for a luxurious experience. It gives a rousing rendition of Cocteau Twins' *Lorelei* too, sounding powerful and expansive, without a hint of harshness. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Superb, musical sound; clean styling; ease of use

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Lack of facilities and connectivity

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: No-nonsense, fuss-free combo that's designed to sound great

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Musical Fidelity M3scd/M3si

This great British hi-fi brand has been around since the early eighties, and has made a bewildering array of products, including some iconic ones like the A1 Class A integrated amplifier. This combo is the latest mid-price offering, and is rather more mainstream. It is headed up by the new M3scd, which is a CD player complete with digital inputs – which the manufacturer tells us makes it a ‘digital hub’. It sports a new disc loading mechanism, claimed to have very low jitter and a 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC. The machine works

This combo comes over with a sense of authority that others tend to lack

nicely and its disc drawer is smooth. Handsomely styled and well finished like its matching amp, it comes in a choice of black or silver aluminium fascias with pressed steel casework done to a good standard.

The partnering M3si amplifier is also new and appears thoroughly modern in both style and design – looking like one of Musical Fidelity’s high-end AMS amplifiers that has shrunk in the wash. Largely dual mono in construction, it puts out a claimed 85W per channel of Class AB power and boasts five analogue inputs including moving

magnet phono as standard, and a USB digital input that’s linked to a DAC chip running at up to 24-bit/96kHz resolution.

Under the hood, surface mount circuit boards are used, and the Class A preamplifier and power amplifier sections are split with separate taps off the large toroidal transformer.

Sound quality

Another obvious step up the sonic ladder, the Musical Fidelity combo proves an effective performer and will convince anyone that has just heard the Cambridge pairing (reviewed page 11) that there are extra sonic gains available to those that are prepared to pay for them. UB40’s *King* is a little sweeter and more rounded sounding than some less expensive rival combinations, and comes over with a sense of authority that others tend to lack. There is a much more direct connection to the music; it feels less mediated, allowing the song to make a better impression.



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Musical Fidelity
M3scd/M3si

PRICE
£1,000/£1,100

ORIGIN
UK/Taiwan

TYPE
CD player &
integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
M3scd: 6.1kg
M3si: 9.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD) M3scd:
440 x 100 x 380mm
M3si: 440 x 100 x
400mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power:
2x 85W (8ohm)
• M3si inputs: 4x
RCA line; 1x MM
phono; 1x USB
• M3scd DAC:
24-bit Delta-Sigma
chip

DISTRIBUTOR
Musical Fidelity

WEBSITE
musicalfidelity.com

REVIEWED
HFC 401

Coldplay’s *Speed Of Sound* is the same, and it presents things in a tonally smoother and sweeter way compared with the Cambridge’s rather matter-of-fact nature. The difference isn’t profound, though, showing that as you move up the price scale, any improvements become that little bit more subtle.

The free flowing, luxuriant sounds of Herbie Mann’s *Summertime* are carried especially well. The combo seems better able to hang instruments in space, and place them more accurately. At the same time, the track’s gentle rhythms ebb and flow in a less rigid and mechanical way than some rival offerings. Things seem to be so much more natural and subtle.

The Cocteau Twins’ *Lorelei* is also a pleasure, although its dense, forward sound isn’t flattered by the Musical Fidelity combo; it isn’t harsh as such, but it doesn’t quite have the warmth of the Arcam (page 7) and Exposure (opposite). I am particularly impressed by the power of the amp; it goes loud in a clean and controlled way. It also proves a very detailed design, with an insight into the music that most rivals can’t hope to match. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Clean, detailed, sophisticated sound; styling; build

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Lacks tonal warmth of rivals

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Classy mid-price combo with genuine appeal

FEATURES



OVERALL





Roksan

K3 CD/K3 Amp

Impressive though it was, Roksan has decided its K2 range is due a refresh, but can the new K3 better what's come before?

Even though its products have been well received over the years, every five or so years the time comes to refresh the range, and that's what Roksan has done here. The K2 series was excellent, but the company claims the K3 is even better, with improved technologies and design.

Starting with the source, the new K3 CD player gets updated circuitry and improved components. A Burr-Brown PCM1798 24-bit/192kHz-capable DAC is fitted, and this works with a high-precision master clock with less than 150ps of jitter, the company

tells us. The disc mechanism has a front-loading CD drawer; for whatever reason, Roksan has decided not to go to a slot loader. The K3 CD nails its colours to the mast with a 75ohm RCA coaxial digital output and a 110ohm balanced XLR digital out. Perhaps the company views this as a 'last ever CD player' and has kitted it out with serious transport functionality, rather than trying to make it a DAC with a disc drive inside like so many rivals.

The K3 amplifier has five line inputs, moving magnet phono stage and aptX wireless Bluetooth, but no DAC

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Roksan K3 CD

PRICE
£1,250

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
CD player

WEIGHT
9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 102 x 380mm

FEATURES
• Burr-Brown PCM1798 DAC
• Outputs: digital coaxial, optical, balanced AES/EBU (XLR); RCA analogue

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Designs

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
henleydesigns.co.uk; roksan.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 396

functionality. Inside, the amplifier has been the subject of a substantial redesign; laid out symmetrically, it uses new op-amps, audio and power supply circuits. High-quality signal output relays are fitted, and the new chassis gets better ventilation for cooler running. The power amplifier section is directly powered from the mains supply, via a 550VA toroidal transformer with five regulated supply rails. The manufacturer claims 140W RMS per channel into 8ohm, and over 220W into 4; suggesting a robust power supply. This is a lot of power from an amp of this relatively average size, although it's a little heavier than some at 14kg.

Sound quality

The K3s are very nice to use and generally pretty intuitive, although one oddity for those not accustomed to either is that the main power on-off switch on both units is underneath; the fascia has a 'mode' button to flick between on and standby. Supplied with both is the new system remote, an impressive metal-framed device that's nice to use and offers total control. Together the duo is a neat visual match and exudes an air of



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Roksan K3 Amp

PRICE
£1,250

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
14kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 105 x 380mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power: 2x 140W (8ohm)
- Inputs: 5x line; 1x MM phono
- aptX Bluetooth

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Designs

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
henleydesigns.co.uk; roksan.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 396

quality that the previous K2 series didn't quite manage.

The K3 integrated proves to be one of the most enjoyable amplifiers I have heard at this price in a very long time. I find myself wondering why rivals costing three or four times its price don't sound so much fun. It has the unerring ability to make music magic – and it doesn't matter what music it is. Whether it is the brilliant *Electric Café* by Kraftwerk or the rather ropery 2009 remaster of The Beatles' *White Album*, somehow the K3 cuts to the musical quick. It has the special ability to lift you beyond the recording, so you're no longer concerned with it and instead find yourself lost in the music.

It goes beyond normal considerations of a £1,250 amplifier. It has its faults yet they never get in the way. *Mother Nature's Son* by The Beatles seems to take on a life of its own fed from a high-end CD transport and dCS Debussy DAC. Via one of its line inputs the song floats and emotes; the amp throws out an amazingly wide recorded acoustic, seemingly unaware of the loudspeaker boundaries. Tonally it is sweet and smooth, perhaps with a slight accent

on the upper midband, but bass is very strong and slightly warm by its rivals' standards. Dynamically it's superb, really going out of its way to signpost the music's accenting.

With Kraftwerk's *Telephone Call*, the stereo soundstage seems to expand TARDIS-like when you step into the song. It sounds vast, and fills up with crashing electronic percussion, infectious drum breaks and wonderful sequenced keyboard lines. Drum machine cymbals shimmer, electronic baselines grumble, and snares thump. Vocals are beautifully pure, just like you're standing in the vocal booth with Ralf Hutter. I never find myself thinking how good it is at the price; instead I sit there totally immersed in the majesty of the mix. This is a rare talent for any solid-state amplifier, let alone one that costs £1,250.

The phono stage is also good, but you can do better if you spend a serious amount of money on

The K3 is surely the most musical amplifier on sale at or near its price

an offboard one. Fed by a Michell GyroDec/TecnoArm tracking a Goldring 1042 moving magnet, I became completely at one with the music. I cue up an old pressing of Supertramp's *Breakfast In America* and soon am absorbed in *Child Of Vision*, marvelling at the vast amounts of detail, 'walk-around soundstage' and the ease with which all the instruments are able to play independently. The music sounds so unconstrained that I have to keep pinching myself to remember that I am listening to an affordable integrated. Indeed the K3 is able to cheekily fool the listener into ignoring its failings – which admittedly are relatively minor – and celebrate the music like it's my 21st birthday party. The only downside is its slightly limited tonal palette; everything sounds a fraction on the warm side, whether it was originally recorded that way or not. Also, while it is brilliant at throwing stereo images left to right, it doesn't hang them back quite as far as it could.

The matching CD player is also excellent, but struggles to match the brilliance of its partner. Moving from my reference (and very expensive) dCS DAC highlights where it is lacking; there's a little fall off in low-frequency power, midband precision and depth, and treble

definition and space. Still, the K3 CD player sings like its life depends on it; here's a mid-price silver disc spinner that gets into the groove as well as many good vinyl sources. It somehow manages to come over as sounding a lot less processed than most digital disc sources and again has that wonderfully easy rhythmic quality about it. I find myself engrossed by a Deutsche Grammophon recording of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, focusing on the way the orchestra plays and the emotion of the music in general. It's an extremely good performer at the price, and difficult not to like.

Conclusion

As someone that was impressed by the previous K2 range, and someone with a lot of respect for Roksan in general, I expected much from this new K3 pairing and it really doesn't let me down. The integrated amplifier in particular is quite exceptional; it is surely the most musical amplifier on sale at or near its price and is never less than cracking fun to listen to.

The CD player is an incredibly strong partner, and well worth having if you intend to buy the amp too, or if you're looking for a good disc spinner. Together, they're a dynamic duo the likes of which you rarely see near the price. Heartily recommended. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT CD player

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Relaxed, easy, open, musical sound; balanced digital out

DISLIKE: Some may want DAC functionality

WE SAY: Old-school CD player with excellent sound

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT Amplifier

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Exceptionally musical, expansive, powerful sound

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Brilliant mid-price amp with handy Bluetooth input

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Roksan

K3 CD DI

Old-school is perhaps the best way to describe Roksan's K3 CD player (overleaf). It doesn't have a plethora of connectivity options or additional functionality. Instead the accent is very much on sound quality, not superfluities. The K3 CD Di ups the ante by adding a choice of optical and coaxial digital inputs to the mix.

Round the back we have the usual IEC power inlet and RCA phono line outputs – plus Toslink optical, 75ohm coaxial and 110ohm balanced XLR digital outputs. Then there are new digital inputs (also offering optical and coaxial, although no USB – you'll have to buy the K3 DAC for that), which come into play when you reach underneath on the right hand side. Here you will find a secret rocker switch that engages these inputs and tells the internal DAC that it no longer need take its digits from the built-in CD drive. (The CD drive keeps playing regardless of whether the digital input section is switched on, by the way.) The final touch is that a blue LED lights up underneath, quietly informing you that you're now in DAC mode.

Sound quality

Just like the cooking K3 Series combo overleaf, the CD Di has a powerful, expansive, musical and confident character and sounds impressively smooth and sumptuous.

Chic's *Le Freak* often loses its appeal via CD, which can strip it of emotion and make it sound cold and two

dimensional. The Roksan captures the essence of the music brilliantly, showing a hunger for the beat and a sweet and even tonal balance. Its bass is solid and punchy, displaying a fine grip of that wonderful walking bassline. Move up to the midband and you're greeted by a panoramic soundstage; it's certainly less 'shut in' than most. There's lots of detail but it's not thrown at you, and it's fast and dynamically convincing too. The player really captures the accenting of the musicians' playing well, and this makes the song come alive. Treble is decently sweet and smooth, with some nice, well finessed cymbal work.

Feed it the slower *I Dream Of Sheep* by Kate Bush and it's just as impressive. Its inherent tonal evenness and rhythmic alacrity really count in its favour. Bush's voice isn't famously easy to carry for lesser digital sources, yet the CD Di gives a wonderfully intimate and rousing rendition. There's no sign of edge, harshness or grit, and this in conjunction with the superb piano work gives a spellbinding performance. In absolute terms there's a tiny loss of focus and looseness in the bass, but you'd have to spend a lot more money to improve matters. The Roksan has a very likeable nature that doesn't draw out the faults in the recording or itself; for a mid-price player that's a really good trait.

Switch the digital input on and it doesn't matter whether the CD is playing or not; the light underneath lights up (and changes colour

depending on the source) and the music comes from the input you've selected. I try a Sony Blu-ray player and a Cyrus CD transport and both give excellent results, the latter just edges it with a more powerful bass and better focus up top.

Metallica's *Enter Sandman* can sound brittle with some DACs, but the digital input works as well as the built-in CD player. It's fast, bracing and thrilling, with real grit to those fuzz-boxed electric guitars and shimmering ride cymbals. The snare drums cut through the mix like the proverbial cutlery through animal fat, and there's a good degree of depth to the soundstage. This is unexpected for a player of this price, given the dense and highly compressed recording – it requires real forensic detail retrieval skills to do this.

The K3 CD Di sounds excellent by class standards, offering the relatively rare combination of smooth tonality with a very lively and animated way of presenting the music. Some will wonder why a USB digital input isn't included, but for that, Roksan offers the K3 DAC. Despite the limited range of digital inputs, this is still a far more versatile product than the standard silver disc spinner, and may well clinch the deal for many. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Roksan K3 CD Di

PRICE
£1,300

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
CD player/DAC

WEIGHT
9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 105 x 380mm

FEATURES

- DAC: Burr-Brown 24/192 chip
- Outputs: 1x RCA stereo analogue; 1x digital coaxial; 1x digital optical; 1x balanced AES/EBU (XLR)
- Digital inputs: 1x coaxial; 1x optical

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Designs

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
henleydesigns.co.uk; roksan.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 403

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Strong, musical sound; tonal balance; digital input

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Fiddly digital input switch; lacks a USB input

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Superb affordable CD player with real appeal

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

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Cambridge CXN

A bit of a do-it-all device, the CXN isn't just a streamer/network player, it is also designed as a DAC and a digital preamp, having a range of inputs including an asynchronous USB, plus a choice of fixed or variable analogue outputs on both RCA phonos and XLRs. It also has AirPlay and Spotify Connect capability, with a choice of wired or wireless network connection and can be used with the optional Cambridge Audio BT100 aptX Bluetooth receiver (£70) for wireless music streaming from smartphones, tablets and computers.

It can handle content at up to 24/192 over network connections or from USB storage devices, for which a Type-A USB socket is provided on the rear panel (alongside another used for the wi-fi antenna that comes supplied), with a further socket on the fascia. Both optical and coaxial digital in and outputs are also provided, while its Type-B USB input will also handle DSD content. All inputs are upsampled to 24-bit/384kHz using Cambridge's second-generation inhouse Adaptive Time Filter processing, running on a 32-bit Analog Devices SHARC processor.

Sound quality

The CXN lives up to its promise of focusing on rhythm, timing and bass quality. It may upsample the digital signal, with typically finessed smoothness and refinement, but that doesn't stop it kicking hard when you

creep up on it with the Prodigy's *The Day Is My Enemy*, in 24-bit/44.1kHz and unleash the title track. Boy, can this little player thunder and thump! The authentic Prodigy aural onslaught is unrestrained, bass lines shake the room and the electronica going on above it all is suitably sharp edged. Add in impressive dynamics and you have a real power track, being handled with just the right mix of definition and sheer attack.

Impressively, the CXN repeats the trick when things are dialled down a few notches with Blur's reggae-tinged *Ghost Ship*, from *The Magic Whip*, dishing up a rumbling, but tightly defined, bass line while bringing out plenty of detail in the vocal and instrumentation. Play this through a decent amp combined with some speakers able to handle that powerful low end and you're not going to be at all disappointed by the results.

Getting a bit into this whole bass thing by now, I give some tracks from an Ian Dury compilation a spin, just to enjoy that whip-crack Blockheads rhythm section, and the Cambridge doesn't let me down. Not in terms of motive power and certainly not when it comes to revealing all the clever things that the rest of this tight-knit band is doing in its usual jazzy, funky manner.

Keeping things well away from the audiophile approved, I play in some of the *Concert For New York* in a DSD64 rip from SACD. Again the CXN does its stuff with fine live presence

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cambridge CXN

PRICE
£700

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Network music player/DAC/digital preamp

WEIGHT
3.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 85 x 305mm

FEATURES
• DSD playback over USB from computer
• aptX Bluetooth with optional dongle
• Apple AirPlay & Spotify Connect
• Fixed and variable outputs on XLR & RCA phonos

DISTRIBUTOR
Audio Partnership

TELEPHONE
0207 9402200

WEBSITE
cambridgeaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 399

on a rough and ready version of *Miss You* by Mick and Keef, and then a slamming nine-minute *Won't Get Fooled Again* from The Who – not clean, not nice, but very definitely fun.

A swift handbrake turn into the solo piano version of Mussorgsky's *Pictures At An Exhibition*, another DSD64 from the Mercury Living Presence recording, and the Cambridge delights with the focus on the piano, placed convincingly in an open, natural soundstage, a little deep behind the plane of the speakers to allow the ambience to wrap round it, but at the same time with all the percussive power of the instrument on tap when required. Not at all bad for a recording just about to hit its 54th birthday, and a fine example of what good SACD/DSD can do when carefully mastered from old analogue tapes, and then played on fine equipment.

It seems that whatever you throw at it, the CXN shines, thanks to its winning combination of delicacy and resolution, allied to all the weight and slam that you would expect from a streamer/DAC at this level – and then some.

This is an impressive network audio component that delivers a very high standard, and is something really rather special. **JP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Powerful but poised sound; high standard of build; simple to use

DISLIKE: Bluetooth is extra; nothing else at the price

WE SAY: A versatile network player with smart looks and great sound at the right price



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Denon DRA-100

Designed as a network receiver, the DRA-100 will stream content up to 24/192, plus DSD64/128 (2.8/5.6MHz) over both its Ethernet connection and the front-panel USB. There's built-in wi-fi, complete with twin antennae, which are also used for AirPlay and Bluetooth. Around the back are two optical digital inputs and one coaxial, plus two sets of analogue ins, while alongside the speaker terminals there's also a pair of audio outs, switchable between fixed and variable-level operation, a mono subwoofer out and a headphone output, which has a three-position gain setting to cope with tricky loads.

Under the skin, the Denon uses inhouse Advanced AL32 Processing, to give a smoother sound by expanding 16-bit music formats to 32-bit before DAC conversion. DDFA (Direct Digital Feedback Amplifier) architecture from CSR is used to deliver an output quoted as 35W per channel into 8ohm, or double that into a 4ohm load.

Sound quality

Initially it takes a few hours from 'cold' to hit its stride, and sounds a bit thin and uninvolved while doing so. A quick read of the manual reveals that, as a default, its maximum output is limited to -30dB: there's also an option to set this to -15dB, or turn this limit off completely.

Having turned it off completely, and switched out the tone controls using

the 'source direct' option, it suddenly sounds a lot healthier, and as it runs for a day or so the sound warms up and fills out. By the beginning of the second day of use the system sounds both bigger and richer, and loses the bright and splashy treble it displays straight from the box.

Once in its stride, it proves to be quite a remarkable little amplifier, fully able to drive some fairly ambitious speakers to very good effect. As well as the Neat Iotas (*HFC* 357) I use as my desktop speakers, and Monitor Audio's Bronze 2, the Denon is also used into a pair of PMC GB1 floorstanders. Past experience with the company's little D-M series micro components suggests it should be more than capable of handling the GB1 – and it is, delivering a big, bold, room-filling sound and only hardening up a little when pushed really hard. Even then the effect rolls in progressively and in a fairly benign manner – too many amps do well until the point where things suddenly go horribly wrong, but no such problems here.

Play something hard-driving, such as a 24-bit/96kHz download of Keith Richards' *Heartstopper* and the Denon clearly plays things slightly safe with its refined, warm sound; however, there's excellent intelligibility and the music motors along appealingly. Yes, the track has a little more to give in terms of instrumental detail, but it's hard not to like the way the DRA-100 plays this album.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Denon DRA-100

PRICE
£799

ORIGIN
Japan/China

TYPE
Network music player & amplifier

WEIGHT
4.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
280 x 104 x 337mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x 35W (8ohm)
• Support for files up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD128/5.6MHz
• AirPlay, Bluetooth and Ethernet/wi-fi connectivity
• Inputs: 2x RCA line inputs; coaxial; 2x optical and USB-A digital inputs

DISTRIBUTOR
D+M Group Europe

TELEPHONE
02890 279830

WEBSITE
denon.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 404

Treat it to a warmer, cleaner recording and it is in its element, cruising through the relatively undemanding noodling of David Gilmour's *Rattle That Lock* (24/96) while still delivering fine vocal and instrumental textures. It's not a sound to set the world on fire, but rather it's able to do anything you ask of it: decent bass weight and definition, plenty of detail, but an overall sense of smoothness and refinement.

This balance means it's well suited to high-quality recordings of jazz or classical music, with a lovely presence and three-dimensionality to Gary Cooper's set of Bach keyboard concertos (on Etcetera) in DSD64: the solo instrument is clearly focused and has a suitably percussive sound, while the interplay of the B'Rock Orchestra is delivered with both detail and real rhythmic punch.

What's more, the DRA-100 is more than capable of showing the gains in space and presence when stepping up from 2.8MHz DSD to 5.6MHz.

By any standards then, this is a fine-sounding amplifier, well suited to use with a wide range of speakers; that it also offers so much in terms of functionality makes it an even more compelling buy. **AE**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

LIKE: Style and solidity; excellent app; wide-ranging format compatibility

DISLIKE: No asynchronous USB

WESAY: A highly attractive and well-equipped compact amplifier, with a refined and generous sound

OVERALL

★★★★★



Naim

NAC-N 272

Drawing on existing kit and adding some twists along the way, this looks like it could be the most complete Naim product yet

Among the Naim faithful, every hint of a new product is greeted with endless speculation about what's on the way and the trotting out of well-polished wish lists often encompassing products perfect for the list-maker, but potentially of such niche appeal that they could probably never happen.

Somewhere deep within Naim's HQ, I can't help but think such speculation is often the cause of some amusement as the company seems to be able to wrong foot the guessers every time by announcing something no one saw coming, but which proves an entirely logical addition to its catalogue.

The NAC-N 272 caught them on the hop, but has rapidly established itself as not just a product coveted by those whose immediate reaction was "You've launched what?", but also the subject of some rapid myth-creation on the part of the more fanatical Naimees. The initial surprise was that

the company chose to introduce another streaming preamplifier, when it already has the NAC-N 172 XS. So what is the NAC-N 272? Well, it's a preamplifier with network music player capability that has both digital and analogue inputs plus a choice of fixed or variable-level outputs (so that you can plug it into an existing amplifier as a source component, straight into a power amplifier or as source and control for a pair of active loudspeakers). There's wired or wi-fi networking, a USB input on the front to which you can connect a USB drive or your smartphone or tablet, Bluetooth for wireless hookup of portable devices and Spotify Connect compatibility.

The main option here is an internally fitted DAB/DAB+/FM radio tuner module, if the onboard internet radio provision isn't sufficient, but there is one more typically Naim touch: like the NAC-N 172 XS, and unlike other Naim

preamps, the NAC-N 272 has its own internal power supply, built around a hefty toroidal transformer with separate windings for the analogue, DAC, digital processing and control sections. It's also possible to upgrade the NAC-N 272 with the addition of an offboard power supply: Naim's XP5 XS, XPS or 555 PS can be used.

With that done, the mains power switch on the rear of the preamp can be turned off, so the internal transformer is bypassed, thus removing a possible source of vibration and adding a lower impedance power supply setup with more regulation. While the effects of these upgrades are outside the scope of this review, I have tried the 272 with both the XPS and 555 PS, and concur with Naim that "the differences in performance are not subtle".

One of the main talking points will either have you thinking "At last!" or "So what?", depending on your point of view. The NAC-N 272 is the first Naim product able to play DSD files (although the capability is being rolled out to the ND5 XS, NDX and NDS network players and the SuperUniti, all of which are built around the same SHARC processor at the heart of this unit). Whatever your view on DSD, the fact is that increasing numbers of digital devices support it, and it's becoming one of those digital boxes seemingly needing to be ticked: the Naim can do DSD64/2.8MHz, and via USB, electrical digital input or over a network (given UPnP software in your NAS able to serve DSD files to it).

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Naim NAC-N 272

PRICE
£3,300

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Network music
player/preamp/DAC

WEIGHT
12.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 87 x 314mm

FEATURES
• Streaming/
playback up to
192kHz/24-bit &
DSD64/2.8MHz
• aptX Bluetooth;
wi-fi & Ethernet
streaming
• Spotify Connect
• Inputs: BNC; 2x
RCA; 3x Toslink
optical; DIN, 2x RCA

DISTRIBUTOR
Naim Audio Ltd

TELEPHONE
01722 426600

WEBSITE
naimaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 400



The design of the N 272 will be familiar to Naim followers

How relevant is DSD? Well, there's a growing number of labels offering content either as downloads or on SACDs, with the classical labels particularly strong in the latter respect, and quite a few enthusiasts with modded 'old model' Sony PlayStation 3 consoles in use as a means of ripping SACDs to files the Naim can play. Yes, some are dismissive of DSD as an irrelevance in the second decade of the 21st century, but the fact remains there are thousands of SACD titles out there, plus that resurgence in the availability of new recordings.

Unlike some offering DSD capability, Naim has opted to do things the proper way: the DSD signal is kept as pure as possible by stripping out the digital header information, leaving only the audio to be optimised for the NAC-N 272's DAC by integer resampling it to 40-bit/705.6kHz, then feeding it to the 24-bit DAC, bypassing the digital filter.

All this is done using Naim-written software, not an off-the-shelf solution, with that SHARC processor also looking after buffering, reclocking and de-jittering of incoming digital signals, as is done in the NDS and other Naim network players. As in those players, the digital and analogue sections are isolated and only connected optically to prevent any interference between them, with the main circuit boards floated

to avoid mechanical interference, and even the wiring between the rear-panel connections and the internals designed to the same effect.

Finally there's analogue relay switching for the various inputs, completely isolating those that are not in use, and a volume control derived from the one used in Naim's £155,000 Statement amplifier, combining a resistor ladder for optimal signal purity with digital control for convenience. Again optical isolation is used to avoid interference between the digital and analogue sections, and completing the specification is a high-quality headphone amplifier section, for driving even demanding loads.

The NAC-N 272 comes complete with Naim's simple, but functional, remote control, but is best driven using the company's n-Stream app, available for Android and iOS devices.

Sound quality

As a preamp, it is of course impossible to test the NAC-N 272 in isolation, so Naim has supplied a NAP 250 power amp, which is one of the models (along with the less expensive NAP 200) that it sees as typical partners for the new product.

Who's the 272 designed for? Well, Naim suggests it's well suited to users moving up from one of its Uniti products to build a higher end system, while it's also aimed at owners of its earlier preamps who want to add network playback capability to their system while reducing the box count by avoiding the need for a separate player and preamp (not to mention power supply for the pre they may have been using).

Of course, the Naim seems to be all about high-quality recordings in DSD64 and hi-res PCM-based formats, so it seems only fitting to start listening by blasting out some KLF at silly volume, making the most of the power of the NAP 250 and the clarity of the preamp.

So with a CD-quality rip of *America: What Time Is Love?*, all nine glorious minutes of it, hammering out of the speakers, it is clear that even when the music is in full-on attack mode, the Naim can allow striking insight into the depths of the mix. And it can do so while maintaining those traditional traits of timing, rhythm and driving musicality, not to mention thundering bass: it's glorious stuff.

Similarly with the (admittedly undemanding) rhythms of Hot Chip's wonderful *Why Make Sense?* set, in a 24-bit/44.1kHz FLAC download, the Naim makes a good job of the sting of

percussion and the weight of the bass, while still bringing out good character in the vocals and lead instruments, even if the whole enterprise does tend to wash over the listener in an inoffensive blur (which is down to the music, not the system).

The sound gets even more impressive as some Roxy Music is summoned up from the NAS, in the form of *Dance Away* from a PS3 rip of the SACD of *Manifesto*. Ferry's vocal is kept focused centre stage, but most impressive is the way the Naim makes the most of that tight, clean bassline and the little touches of percussion, really bringing the track to life.

Yes, we've strayed into DSD territory here, and this player/preamp makes a very strong case for the survival/revival of the format: delve back into the Roxy catalogue to 1972's *For Your Pleasure*, and the shuddering, juddering chug of *The Bogus Man* is revealed in all its menacing glory,

A fine cornerstone around which to build a streaming audio setup

while the bonkers synth break of *Editions Of You* is all about early Eno at his finest, the electronics shrieking and parping magnificently.

Conclusion

So, is the NAC-N 272 a giant killer within the Naim range? Well, it's very good indeed, but I wouldn't go that far, although I'll withhold final judgement until I've heard what some of the pricier network players in the lineup can do when they're all DSD'd up. What is beyond doubt is that on any terms this is a very impressive solution to bringing an older system bang up to date, as well as a fine cornerstone around which to build an all-new streaming audio setup. **JP**

HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Flexibility; belting sound quality; upgradeability
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: No USB input for computer; limited streaming service support so far
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: An excellent addition to the Naim range: the NAC-N 272 sounds superb
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Small, smart and very simple Xeo 2

We want the full sound. Everywhere, all around.

The Xeo 2 is the perfect combination of effortless enjoyment and high-quality sound. It is Dynaudio's smallest high performance wireless speaker system yet. It is small, smart and versatile. Everything you need.



DYNAUDIO



Onkyo

C-N7050

Whether you'd call it a network-equipped CD player, or a CD-equipped streamer doesn't really matter. What's important here is that it brings together the key ways that most people currently consume digital audio into one compact and highly affordable box. It also adds internet radio, two USB inputs and iPod connectivity, meaning that it's a most flexible device. Digi-philes will also like the sound of the 5.6MHz DSD functionality, in addition to the standard 24-bit/192kHz FLAC and WAV playback. There's even a smartphone app to make controlling it easier, too.

There are two absentees, however. First, there's no wi-fi, meaning you'll need to connect it to your router via an Ethernet cable. Likewise, there is no aptX Bluetooth playback either. In my experience this isn't a particularly fine sounding way of listening to music, but there's no denying that it's more attractive than DLNA.

At the heart of the C-N7050 is a 32-bit Burr-Brown PCM1795 DAC, which delivers gapless streaming of both 2.8 and 5.6MHz Direct Stream Digital files, 24-bit/192kHz FLAC and WAV, and 24/96 Apple Lossless formats. Also supported are MP3, AAC, WMA, WMA Lossless and Ogg Vorbis files.

Sound quality

Considering its price and myriad abilities, you can't help but be impressed by how well it performs. A

decade ago, it would be asking a lot from a £350 CD player to sound smooth, detailed, even and agile, but the C-N7050 does all of this and so much more.

Zero 7's *In The Waiting Line* presents itself in a thoroughly pleasing yet engaging manner. The Onkyo sounds subtle, delicate and immersive. Treble is unexpectedly smooth and devoid of grain in the upper registers, while the midband is spacious and expansive with lots of detail. Stage depth isn't as good as you would expect from more expensive digital front ends, however, with a tendency to hang the soundstage around the plain of the loudspeakers. Yet the wealth of detail never fails to charm.

The bass isn't as powerful as you might hear from some similarly priced CD players, but there's a satisfyingly rhythmic gait to the proceedings. It makes the music enjoyably uplifting, and highly satisfying to listen to.

Switch to some less laid-back programme material such as *Los Endos* by Genesis, and the fine character still shines through, although it does become more apparent that it's a budget machine you're listening to. This is because it doesn't quite have the dynamic range of some more expensive designs. While it's very good at microdynamics, it fails to convey the absolute power of Phil Collins' crashing drum work; it doesn't have the out-and-out power of higher-end kit. Nevertheless you're again drawn into the enjoyable

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Onkyo C-N7050

PRICE
£350

ORIGIN
Japan/China

TYPE
CD and network music player

WEIGHT
4.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
435 x 102 x 302mm

FEATURES
• DAC: Burr-Brown PCM1795 chip
• Outputs: analogue stereo RCA; optical & coaxial digital
• Inputs: 2x USB; Ethernet port

DISTRIBUTOR
Onkyo UK

TELEPHONE
08712 001996

WEBSITE
onkyo.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 394

listening experience it delivers; it never fails to lose your attention or make music sound sullen.

A 24-bit/96kHz version of Kate Bush's *Snowflake* proves a real joy. The streaming capabilities are subtle enough to convey the delicacy of this superb song and its drama too. It's a sparse affair with at times only very light instrumentation, yet the C-N7050 never loses the rhythmic plot and maintains full control of the flow of the song right through to the end. Kate Bush's icy voice is handled dexterously, and never descends into brightness unlike many rival budget digital audio sources. Again the soundstage is wide and capacious, although it isn't quite as immersive as it could be thanks to slightly curtailed stage depth.

Running the gamut of music files and sources, the C-N7050 proves to be a surprisingly enjoyable device to listen to. Tonally smooth, with a pleasing amount of air and space across the midband and treble, it sports a fluid and articulate bass. This ties in with its innate rhythmic ability, that's able to really involve the listener in the music. Factor in build quality and the multitude of functions and it's hard to fault at the price. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Fine sound; great features; ease of use; decent build

DISLIKE: Anodyne styling; no aptX Bluetooth or wi-fi

WE SAY: Excellent affordable do-it-all digital source component

oppo



PM-3

Award-winning personal audio
& home theatre innovation

Planar Magnetic Headphones | Universal Blu-ray Players | Headphone Amplifiers



BDP-103D
BDP-105D



PM-1

PM-2



HA-2

oppodigital.co.uk



Novafidelity

X40

Anyone planing to commit their music collection to some kind of digital storage solution has a wish list in mind. They'd like an all-in-one unit able to rip, store and play CDs; or something able to access internet radio and lossless streaming services; or perhaps a means of ripping their LP collection to hard disk for playback. Maybe they want to record from the radio – internet-streamed or FM; or have a unit holding music able to be accessed by other players around the house; or even something to store and play not only hi-res PCM-based music but also DSD files.

If you've been sitting reading that and ticking off the things you'd like to have, then look no further. All the functions previously mentioned – and quite a few more – are loaded aboard the Novafidelity X40.

The X40 also has the ESS Sabre32 Reference DSD/DXD DAC chip, so it can handle both DSD64/2.8MHz and DSD128/5.6MHz content as well as DXD up to 24-bit/352.8kHz and PCM at up to 32-bit/384kHz, and do so in native form, not by jiggery pokering the content down in resolution. Also new is a moving magnet phono input so that you can digitise vinyl at up to 24-bit/192kHz. Completing the package is a choice of analogue outputs: to reinforce its serious intent, the X40 comes complete with balanced XLRs as well as the regular RCA phono socket outputs, and both sets can be used at either fixed level

– for use into a regular amplifier – or variable for direct connection to a power amplifier or active speaker.

Sound quality

The sound of the X40 is instantly appealing: whether on internet radio stations or with hi-res music all the way up to DSD, it has no shortage of punch and drive, coupled with fine insight into the detail of a recording.

It makes the most of the extra quality available in DSD, DXD and hi-res PCM files, thanks to substantial bass as adept when crashing out the rhythm section of The Who in full flight as it is with grumbly synth-bass lines or the weight of a full symphony orchestra. What's more, it's not just that there's a lot of bass on offer: the speed and definition down in the lower registers is equally impressive, whether with lightning-fast electric bass or the rosinny growl of an upright instrument. It's a sound designed to encourage you to turn the system up and enjoy the clout on offer. And when you do the reward is thrilling power and slam, more than up to the standard of a very good CD player.

Things get even better when you load up a DSD file and revel in the big, organic-sounding low-end higher-resolution recordings can deliver, while at the same time giving you all that sense of space and character that's so much a part of the appeal of hi-res played on good equipment.

Play some tight small-group jazz, and the X40 reveals its ability to

shimmer out cymbals and present piano with full weight. Step things up to the current Blur set, and its speed and ability to drive rhythms cleanly ensures the music holds the attention and rewards close listening.

By any standards, what this unit can do is remarkable: all that flexibility has been achieved without any compromise in sound quality, as soon becomes clear whether playing solo classical instruments or high-octane rock recordings. If the material you load onto the X40 and the rest of your system is up to the task, this is a recorder/player fully able to deliver all that a recording has to give, and do so with no more than a twist and a push of the main control.

Yes, you're going to have to spend some time with it to do any more than scratch the surface of the wide-ranging competence here – by the way, it makes very good rips from LP (and is of sufficient quality to mean you'd better be using it with a pretty good turntable) – but this is one of those components that rewards with extended use.

Just when you think you've got it all, chances are you're going to find something else it does – and does very well indeed. **JP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Novafidelity X40

PRICE
£1,299

ORIGIN
Korea

TYPE
2TB music server system

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
435 x 99 x 325mm

FEATURES
• DAC: ESS Sabre32 Reference chip
• DSD/DXD capable
• Ethernet networking (wireless via optional dongle)
• Inputs: 1x RCA; 1x 3.5mm jack; 1x optical; 1x coaxial; 1x MM phono; 3x USB host ports
• Outputs: fixed and variable analogue RCA and XLR; optical, coaxial and AES/EBU
DISTRIBUTOR
Sygnifi Ltd
TELEPHONE
01732 765105
WEBSITE
sygnifi.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 399

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Features; powerful, persuasive sound; balanced outputs

DISLIKE: Browser control interface

WE SAY: Novafidelity has added winning sound to its already amazing flexibility



Entotem Plato

Introducing the do-it-all box of tricks that mixes the old with the new to deliver all of your music (and video) with ease

I doubt many hi-fi watchers would have bet on the all-in-one music centre still being a serious proposition half a century after being put in the stocks and pelted with disdain by the enthusiast elite. Despite the negative baggage, 'music centre' perfectly describes the type of product whose time seems finally to have come: a merging of digital media and computer tech, of convenience and connectivity, that some say is already mapping the future of hi-fi on every level. The more fully featured examples go by the name of media servers or digital hubs – single units packing the wherewithal to process and disseminate separate audio and visual digital media strands to

multiple rooms with complete flexibility, usually via a control app.

For a quartet of music-loving entrepreneurs from Derby, this wasn't far enough. They reasoned that a true music centre for the 21st century should be able to connect with the past as well as the present and the future, serving not just as a conduit for digital sources but also a place where legacy analogue kit such as a turntable or cassette deck could be plugged in and played, allowing LPs and tapes to be copied on the fly and archived as hi-res digital files. In other words, a box that ticks all the boxes.

Entotem's big claim is that Plato will revolutionise the way we use entertainment media in our homes, consolidating all media access

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Entotem Plato

PRICE
£3,600

ORIGIN
England

TYPE
2TB music/video server system

WEIGHT
14kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
370 x 130 x 300mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power: 2x 45W (8ohm)
- Audio formats: FLAC; ALAC; MP3; m4a, PCM/WAVE; AAC
- 24-bit/192kHz recording from analogue sources
- Inputs: 3x stereo RCA; MM/MC phono; 1x coaxial & 3x optical digital; Ethernet; 2x USB
- Outputs: analogue stereo RCA; 2x optical digital; HDMI

DISTRIBUTOR
Entotem Ltd

TELEPHONE
01332 291972

WEBSITE
entotem.com

REVIEWED
HFC 400

through one simple and, for the time being, Android-powered, interface. The basic hardware, tightly packaged in a plain chassis that looks a lot like a home printer, consists of preamp and 45W-per-channel Class A/B power amp (or you can connect one of your choice), 2TB hard drive, DAC and ADC for video and 24-bit/192kHz hi-res audio recording and playback and MM/MC phono stage.

As Plato connects to any network, it automatically looks up other uPnP devices and is able to access their audio/video content, supporting FLAC, ALAC, MP3, m4a, PCM/WAVE and AAC on the audio side and .mov, mpeg2, mpeg4, H263 and H264 video. The back panel layout looks clear and straightforward with four analogue and four digital inputs, two digital outputs and a pre-out to connect a power amp if desired. Plug-and-twist Neutrik sockets require the necessary matching connectors for the speaker cables at the amp end. In addition, there are sockets for HDMI output, Ethernet and USB inputs for additional storage, plus an earthing terminal for a turntable. The front panel could hardly be less cluttered totting a tiny on/off button, a single USB in and a 5in touchscreen display.

I have to confess that my heart sinks a little to learn that the system is

controlled by an app designed for Android, which is an OS I've never really gelled with, though iOS will follow. Whatever the operating system, Plato can integrate with other DLNA (Digital Living Network Alliance) kit such as Sonos to provide different music in different rooms around the house. Internet radio and Spotify can also be played and the integration of Gracenote, familiar to iTunes users, means music recorded to the system is easily accessed as the track/album artwork is displayed on the display and, more conveniently the control app of whatever tablet it's installed on.

Entotem's Ian Grostate and Dave Belcher, respectively commercial director and development director, deliver the pre-production Plato in person so we can go through the set up together and see how it sits with my particular requirements, which happen to be entirely music based and don't require the TV or multi-room functionality. The smooth-edged review sample is very heavy for its size and has a rather fetching custard yellow paint job. Plato will ship with a black finish as standard, but other colours will be available on request. Essentially, as the hub of my second room system, I want it to 'internalise' my Pro-Ject Debut Carbon turntable with a view to straight-through listening and making a few vinyl rips, take the feed from my Cambridge Audio digital dock/iPod Classic and do a good job with internet radio. I've lined up two sets of speakers: my Edwards Audio SP2 (HFC 393) £1k bijou floorstanders and a £3k pair of DALI Rubicon 6s (HFC 399).

First job is to connect Plato to my TCP/IP network router with the supplied Ethernet Cat5 cable. This enables Plato to play internet radio data streams and facilitates Gracenote searches. Fortunately my router is conveniently close. If it wasn't, the connection would have to be more circuitous via mains sockets equipped with two or more 'home plug' devices.

Plugging in the turntable and digital dock is as simple as it would be with any amp/DAC. Power on, we're ready to roll – or ready to explore the control app, anyway. Ian and Dave have brought along a full-sized Samsung Galaxy tablet with it pre-installed. A small Plato icon on the home screen launches the app and, for anyone familiar with Android, finding your way around from there on should be a breeze. The 'main drawer' drop-down on the far left of the top menu bar is the starting point to access Plato's core functions:

external sources, the hard-disc library, internet radio, playlists and the import/export protocols.

One of the first things I want to try is ripping an LP to a 24-bit/192kHz file and storing it in the hard disc media library. At the very least it's a good exercise as it takes you through most of Plato's key features. First, select 'External Source' from the 'main drawer' drop-down menu and choose turntable from the eight possible inputs. Pressing the turntable icon for a few seconds, rather than tapping it, bypasses the default recording settings and allows you to configure your own. The 'Now Playing' tab on the top menu bar brings up a level meter. Dave recommends adjusting the gain so there are no peaks exceeding -6dB, otherwise distortion will ensue and jazz fusion keyboardist Jeff Lorber, currently occupying the Pro-Ject's platter, won't appreciate that. The

Music is delivered in such a stunningly authentic and richly textured fashion

actively equalised MM/MC phono stage is pretty serious and can be adjusted for input impedance as well as gain. There's also a rumble filter.

Initiating the recording is simply a matter of pressing the round red 'button' on the touchscreen, which changes to a square red button to show you're on your way. While this is happening the (usually reliable) Gracenote database is interrogated at six second intervals and, nine times out of 10, the correct album cover artwork and relevant info attaches itself to the recording (this works for CD, iPod and cassette sources too, of course), ready for storage on the hard-disc media library.

Apart from Gracenote's occasional fluff, the tablet's command of Plato isn't always a roaring success, the app sometimes refuses to acknowledge the player's existence, leaving me no option but to poke around on the unit's small touchscreen display to get things moving – a process that can be a bit hit and miss. I'll settle for 'glitchy' as tested in pre-production form. The guys assure me all will be silky smooth for the end user.

Sound quality

Sonically, Plato hits the ground running. Two items of good news. First, Jeff Lorber's funk has seldom sounded funkier using Plato's

straight-through phono stage and amp, and the 24/192 recording is an extremely faithful copy. And secondly, while Plato sounds clean, crisp and dynamic driving the Edwards Audio SP2 floorstanders, it positively loves the big £3k DALI Rubicons, a partnership that sounds outstandingly open, transparent and revealing.

The Plato's DAC is something special, too, taking the digital feed from the Cambridge Audio iPod dock and delivering a mix of clarity, exuberance and power that belies Plato's modest 45W-a-side power output. There's plenty of air with images tightly focused and locked in place. Nor is the presentation in any sense 'hyped'. It sounds true and natural, detail meshing cogently into the larger sonic picture. Ambience is especially well conveyed, lending the necessary beauty and atmosphere to Dave Gilmour's *On An Island* with the full spectrum of tonal colours and instrumental timbres.

The lower frequencies are hardly thunderous, but are endowed with fine energy, timing, good pitch and plenty of rhythmic drive. Taking its sonic cues from any truly good separates system, here's a do-it-all box that fast tracks to the core of the music. Feed it some Led Zep or Joe Walsh and the music is delivered in such a stunningly authentic and richly textured fashion, the experience will pin you to the spot.

Conclusion

Is Plato the game changer Entotem claims? Perhaps that's a claim too far in an audio world increasingly populated with one-box solutions, but for the time being its nicely executed ability to incorporate legacy analogue kit gives it a competitive edge. Others will no doubt follow its lead, but they'll have to be on their game to match Plato's fusion of functionality, flexibility and superb sound quality at the price. A landmark product. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Quality-first solution to making everything sound great
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Control app's teething problems; touchscreen display is small and fiddly
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: We've seen and listened to the future and it's not too shabby at all
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



Black is the standard finish, but other colours are available at £300 extra



"SENSATIONAL LOUDSPEAKERS"

What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, May 2015



3020 BOOKSHELF / STANDMOUNT SPEAKER

The new 3020 loudspeaker benefits from the new 3000 Series' advanced 'Concentric Ring Dome' tweeter, boasting both low distortion and exceptionally wide dispersion. For optimum sonic performance, this tweeter is mounted into the beautiful new, 'pivotal braced', rigid, low resonance cabinet. An eleven component 'audiophile' crossover links the tweeter with an ultra-dynamic, Aramid Fibre/Paper coned 125mm mid/bass driver, to deliver an extended bass response with fast dynamics, wonderfully open, realistic midrange and an extraordinary 'being there' three dimensional soundstage.

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"a quality of sound well beyond the typical expectations of a sub-£300 speaker."

What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision, May 2015



"Engaging, accurate sound coupled to great build and the lowest price. What's not to like?"

Hi-Fi Choice, Group Test Winner, October 2015



"a tremendous loudspeaker that delivers more musical satisfaction than you would ever reasonably expect"

AVForums, August 2015

Find out more at www.Qacoustics.co.uk



BEAUTIFULLY ENGINEERED SOUND



Audio-Technica

AT-LP120USBHC

A name that's well-known to vinyl enthusiasts, Audio-Technica has been around for many years. This package includes its AT95E moving magnet cartridge, a built-in phono stage that can be plugged straight into any line-level input or can be bypassed when used with equipment that has a moving magnet phono input stage. There's also a USB output to connect it to a computer for digitising LPs at CD quality of 16-bit/44kHz or 48kHz, and it comes bundled with all the necessary cables and Audacity open-source recording software to

The AT-LP120 gives a relaxed and warm presentation with its internal phono stage

digitise your vinyl. The turntable has a nice, solid feel and includes a removable hinged acrylic dust cover.

The LP120's quartz-controlled direct-drive DC turntable motor has 33, 45 and 78rpm speeds selectable via push buttons, as well as reverse mode for any budding DJs. There is a built-in stroboscopic lamp for illuminating the markings on the edge of the cast aluminium platter for accurate adjustment of playing speeds and pitch is adjustable within $\pm 10\%$ or $\pm 20\%$ ranges. The supplied mat is a slip mat, but this

can easily be exchanged for a different one if desired, such as a cork and rubber or foam option. Another nice feature is a pop-up target light to illuminate the cartridge at the beginning of the LP. This will be really useful to assist in cueing in dim lighting conditions.

The tonearm has a removable headshell with a standard SME connector, making cartridge changes a breeze. A reputable AT95e cartridge is supplied and features a dual magnet design fitted with an elliptical diamond stylus. The instructions point out that this cartridge is not suitable for playing 78rpm records, so swapping to a different cartridge would be recommended. A good plan would be to purchase another headshell and fit a suitable cartridge in that – why not check out our headshells mini test in *HFC 396*.



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audio-Technica
AT-LP120USBHC

PRICE

£399

ORIGIN

Japan

TYPE

Direct-drive
turntable with USB

WEIGHT
10.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
450 x 157 x 352mm

FEATURES
• 33, 45 & 78rpm
• AT95E moving
magnet cartridge
• USB output 16/44.1
& 48kHz-compatible

DISTRIBUTOR
Audio-Technica UK

TELEPHONE
0113 2771441

WEBSITE
eu.audio-technica.
com

REVIEWED
HFC 398

Sound quality

The deck is very easy to set up and the speed is spot on when viewed with the built-in strobe. Starting off with some Borodin, the full orchestra sounds very agreeable, although a little restrained. Swapping the AT95E cartridge with a Goldring 2400 does not make a significant difference, so I bypass the internal phono amp and plug the deck into the moving magnet phono stage input of my Exposure amp. Immediately, the orchestra blossoms and this improvement remains when I re-install the AT95E cartridge. This is a great little cartridge that really comes alive with a decent phono stage.

The vocals come across as relaxed and warm and this is exemplified by Simon and Garfunkel. *Bridge Over Troubled Water* is lovely and clear with no sense of sibilance. The LP120 similarly gives a very relaxed and warm presentation with Miles Davis, although the hi-hats are a little recessed with the internal phono stage. Finally, the pounding bass line from Laurent Garnier's *Tales Of A Kleptomaniac* proves to be punchy and well extended and the AT-LP120USBHC certainly seems at home with heavy techno music. **NR**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Build quality; great range of features; excellent tonearm/cartridge combination

DISLIKE: Internal phono stage is a little restrained

WE SAY: Likable sound if a little restrained, but its versatility makes it a great all-rounder



Electrocompaniet ECG 1 & ECP 2

Joining the vinyl revival, Electrocompaniet's new ECG 1 turntable and ECP 2 phono stage offer surprising value

With so many new turntables coming out, you'd almost think there was a vinyl revival going on at the moment. Oh hang on, there is. We appear to have a new generation of music fans (plus a couple of old ones thrown in for good measure) getting (back) into the groove. It is to these very people that Electrocompaniet is hoping to sell its new ECG 1 turntable.

The deck comes with the much-liked Jelco SA-750EB tonearm pre-fitted, although you'll have to specify the cartridge yourself (any good dealer can advise on this). This Japanese-produced arm is a fine thing in its own right, and shows excellent judgement on the Norwegian company's part. Any purchaser of this package should

be able to ask their dealer to fit the cartridge, and also set up the deck while they're at it. Although it's far easier to get working than some models, getting it to give its best is the job of an expert and/or enthusiast.

There's nothing new in turntable design. The stereo LP has been around for the best part of 60 years and mono records longer still. The ECG 1 is not a suspended subchassis design; for reasons of simplicity perhaps, it's a massy, non-sprung deck that attempts to damp down the vibrations inside its plinth, rather than dissipate them via a bouncy suspension system. Its feet do this to a point, then it's left to the plinth's sandwich construction, somewhat reminiscent of the Marantz TT-1000 deck of the late seventies,

to sink resonance. Made from three layers – acrylic, aluminium then acrylic – the idea is that the materials resonate at different frequencies, acting as a broadband filter. To this, you add a substantial acrylic platter with no turntable mat; instead the top surface is slightly coarse to stop the disc slipping. This doesn't ring like a metal platter, but the idea isn't new, first surfacing back in the eighties.

The drive system of the ECG 1 wins no prizes for innovation either, but is well implemented. The motor unit is physically disconnected from the plinth to reduce noise, sitting in a circular recess. A substantial rubber belt drives the platter around its edge, with the help of the 24V AC synchronous motor regulated by a two-phase low harmonic analogue sine wave controller. Unusually, it offers three speeds, 33, 45 and 78rpm. The aforementioned Jelco SA-750EB tonearm balances phono cartridges weighing between 4 and 12g. Assembling the turntable, installing a cartridge and adjusting the tonearm takes around an hour to do properly, and then care should be paid to placement. Having only a rudimentary suspension system, the deck benefits from a purpose-designed hi-fi support.

The phono stage is a surprisingly large and hefty affair, and offers a plethora of facilities. Suitable for both

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Electrocompaniet
ECG 1

PRICE
£2,760

ORIGIN
Norway

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
13kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
465 x 153 x 360mm

FEATURES
● 33, 45 & 78rpm
● Jelco SA-750EB
tonearm fitted

DISTRIBUTOR
Electrocompaniet
TELEPHONE
+47 51 741033

WEBSITE
electrocompaniet.
no

REVIEWED
HFC 403



TURNTABLE & PHONO STAGE

'deconstructing' than price rivals like Michell's GyroDec, preferring to give a slightly warmer and more romantic feel to the proceedings. It plays music in a relaxed and enjoyable way; its sound is doubtless influenced by the Jelco tonearm, which has its own unique and slightly soothing quality.

I fit a range of cartridges, from an Audio-Technica AT-95E (*HFC* 387) moving magnet to a Lyra Delos moving coil, but settle with an Audio-Technica AT-OC9 MC. This mid-priced device balances well in the Jelco, tracking sweetly. This feeds the ECP 2 phono stage, which – as you might expect – shares the company's house sound, making for a crisp and engaging vinyl front end. For example, Jade Warrior's *A Winter's Tale* is a classic slice of progressive rock that suits this dynamic duo very well. The opening few phrases, featuring a single vocal set over classical guitar strumming and ethereal flute work,

I've heard few packages at this price that come close to this one

sounds sweet and spacious, yet when the chorus kicks in and the mix gets more complicated, the front end manages to hold things together beautifully. I am still able to hear the instrumental backing behind the layered vocals and powerful, cranked-up electric guitar work. This is just the sort of music that can so often sound completely sterile via digital, but not a bit of it here!

Asked to deal with slightly less spacey programme material, it fares just as well. The 2002 *Kling Klang Mix* of Kraftwerk's *Expo 2000* is next on the platter, an altogether tighter, harder and more uptempo piece of music. Again, this combo proves most enjoyable, the Audio-Technica AT-OC9 showcasing its beautifully well resolved treble and vast wealth of midrange detail. There's a slight sense of some dynamics being softened; the last one tenth of the accents on some electronic percussion work seems to get subsumed, making things a little softer sounding than the OC9 is capable of. This is a typical Jelco trait and is one of the few things that gives away the fact that it isn't a superarm (complete with a superarm price). The music sounds so much more powerful, three dimensional and propulsive, bouncing along nicely to this – one of Kraftwerk's most dancey tunes.

The deck possesses fine speed stability, a quiet and smooth-running main bearing and a genuine sense of unflappability that makes it a pleasure to listen to. The opening piano chords from Daft Punk's *Get Lucky* sound strong and drip with rich harmonics, and by the time the song gets into the first chorus I find myself luxuriating in the warmth and sweetness of the production. The lyrics don't win any prizes, but Nile Rodgers' brilliant musicianship is still in full effect. This Electrocompaniet front end fits the bill perfectly, sounding powerful and stable, with a very subtle warmth and spread to bass notes that's not strictly accurate but enjoyable all the same.

Conclusion

Electrocompaniet's ECG 1/ECP 2 is a fine pairing. The turntable is a thoughtfully engineered and well-made device with a class-leading budget tonearm already fitted, and gives excellent sound for the money. The matching phono stage is a little less glamorous perhaps, but it's no less effective a performer. Full of features, it is highly configurable and has a naturally powerful, clean and detailed sound. Overall then, we'd suggest that you consider both if you're part of – or indeed soon to be a major player in – the great vinyl revival. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Electrocompaniet
ECP 2

PRICE
£1,420

ORIGIN
Norway

TYPE
MM & MC
phono stage

WEIGHT
9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
465 x 78 x 371mm

FEATURES
● Adjustable
capacitance
and resistance
● Adjustable gain
● DC-coupled
design

DISTRIBUTOR
Electrocompaniet

TELEPHONE
+47 51 741033

WEBSITE
electrocompaniet.
no

REVIEWED
HFC 403

moving magnet and moving coil cartridges, it offers a choice of RCA or balanced XLR inputs, and has adjustable gain between 39.8 to 71.4dB (via RCA) or 45.8 to 76.4dB (XLR). Cartridge loading is adjustable from 10 to 47kohm, and capacitance ranges from 0 to 350pF. This is wonderful for vinyl purists, but makes it difficult for less committed users who would prefer a few simple front panel selectors rather than dozens of tiny DIP switches on the back, all of which will require some careful studying of the instruction manual to properly set up. Well built for the price, Electrocompaniet says that the highest-quality selected passive components have been used, alongside state-of-the-art amplifiers.

Sound quality

There's always a bit of a worry when companies not famed for their vinyl sources decide to enter the market, but Electrocompaniet has done it with characteristic thoroughness. This is a fine-sounding turntable, not quite at the very top of its crowded class in terms of sound quality – but still there or thereabouts. I have heard few packages of this price that come close to the performance of this one. It is best described as a clean and open device with a strong and tuneful nature. It is a little less forensic and

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT - ECG 1

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Sweet, musical sound; tonearm; elegant appearance

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Lacks detail compared with the best of the rest

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: A well packaged and pleasing performer

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT - ECP 2

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Clean, powerful, detailed sound; facilities

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Fiddly DIP switches will dissuade many users

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Serious sounding product, but hard to use

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Inspire Hi-fi Elevation

The Inspire Elevation turntable is all about mass, that and taking vinyl replay to new heights with its multi-layered plinth

Given that the functions a turntable must perform successfully are rather set in stone, the number of different approaches taken to carrying them out are impressive. Inspire Hi-fi is very aware of this as the company's portfolio includes, belt, direct and idler-drive turntables and a variety of construction techniques, all with the common aim of great vinyl replay.

The Elevation is an unsuspended deck that combines birch ply and acetyl to be as inert as possible. The birch ply forms the plinth and is built up over multiple layers to produce a thick teardrop-shaped base that

houses the motor, bearing and arm board. Various options are available to then veneer the plinth.

This is then combined with a 50mm-thick acetyl platter, which is a heavyweight piece of engineering and furthers the isolation of the turntable. The platter is interesting in that it doesn't have a conventional spindle. It attaches to the sub platter connected to the motor via a lip on the underside – a system that works well and makes the platter admirably easy to line up. The means of actually citing a record is done via a metal insert that drops into an indentation on the top of the platter. With it in,

you have a spindle in the centre of the platter on axis with the bearing but not extending anywhere near it. This is then topped off by an unthreaded puck-type clamp.

The power for the Elevation is supplied by a Pro-Ject Speed Box DS Strobe. This is an offboard AC power supply that allows for electronic speed control between 33 and 45rpm and fine adjustment of both speeds via the front panel. The connectivity is a little curious as there is a slim low-voltage cable that runs from the mains to the Speed Box and then a hefty IEC cable supplying the Elevation, but electronic speed control is a useful feature as is fine speed adjustment.

To make best use of the adjustment, the Strobe (as the name suggests) is able to power a supplied strobe attachment to check the speed of the platter. This can then be used to check a calibrated disc that is supplied with the deck. This is extremely useful, but the slight counter to this is that the motor in the Elevation does seem to be worked relatively hard to spin the platter. Power it up via the underside switch and the deck doesn't leap into life, but instead gently potters as it gathers pace gradually. Inspire recommends starting the deck and

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Inspire Hi-fi
Elevation

PRICE
£3,140

ORIGIN
UK/Czech Republic
(PSU only)

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
12kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 300 x 200mm

FEATURES
● 33, 45 & 78rpm
● X100 Mk2
tonearm (others
can be specified)
● Ortofon Cadenza
Red cartridge

DISTRIBUTOR
Inspire Hi-fi

TELEPHONE
01246 268887

WEBSITE
inspirehifi.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 402

then swapping records or changing sides on the fly rather than stopping and starting it, which works just fine.

The review sample of the Elevation is built for Rega arm geometry, but Inspire says the specific geometry of any 9in arm can be accommodated if you request it. The deck is available without an arm for £1,390 but Inspire also quotes prices with the Rega 202 and 303 arms and in the spec you see here with its own X100 Mk2 arm for £2,315. The X100 is Rega-derived (hence why it is sitting on a deck with this geometry), but substitutes a tapered carbon armtube with a metal headshell that adjusts alignment separately to the cartridge mounting. If you order the X100 with a cartridge, this is mounted and aligned to the headshell before being attached to the tube, which should ensure accurate setup. This being said, changing cartridges with it in place isn't especially tricky either. For review, the sample arrives with an Ortofon Cadenza Red cartridge (£825).

As a finished article, the Elevation looks smart and well thought out. I personally wouldn't be rushing to veneer the plinth as the ply is a pleasant finish in its own right and gives the deck a slightly Nordic quality. Like most turntables of this type, the Elevation has no dust protection but the footprint is small enough that a number of covers will fit without issue. The build is very good and it feels sturdy in use.

Sound quality

Connected to a Chord Electronics Chordette Dual phono stage (HFC 373), Naim Supernait 2 and Neat Momentum 4i speakers, the Elevation reveals one aspect of its performance from the outset and by and large it is a very welcome one. With some high-mass turntables, the

presentation can be a little dark with tremendous low-end drive but little in the way of top-end sparkle. The Elevation manages to neatly side step this and sounds extremely open and airy. The result is a deck that never hides the impressive heft it can demonstrate, but ensures that it never becomes the dominating feature.

This means that with the unapologetically joyous *The Desired Effect* by Brandon Flowers, it is able to deliver the soaring vocals and unashamedly retro arrangements with real impact while underpinning them with bass that is deep, well defined and impressively fast. The combined effect is a turntable that sounds big and confident, but without tipping over into sterility let alone dullness. When you switch to something more determinedly serious like *Big TV* by The White Lies, it never truly stops wanting to find the joy in the music, but for me at least this is never unduly distracting.

The Inspire Elevation is usefully forgiving of poorer-quality vinyl pressings

Behind this liveliness, the Elevation largely gets the fundamentals right. Tonality is consistently believable and the handling of voices in particular is extremely good. Even when there is a lot happening, it manages to make sense of the information and unpick it in such a way as to make for a performance that's easy to follow and appreciate. There is consistently good detail retrieval from all points of the frequency response and this is presented in a way that never distracts from the overall presentation, but instead effectively augments it.

The soundstage is consistently big and spacious and – while there is sometimes the sense that it can be slightly left/right in nature, leaving the centre a little empty – it rarely distracts from the performance as a whole, although very small-scale recordings can find themselves sounding a little bigger than is really appropriate. Give the Elevation something big to work with, however, and there is no doubt that the deck can do justice to a full orchestra or similar without breaking into a sweat.

The rendition of *Berlin Sunrise* by Fink and Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra is a chance for the Inspire to deliver a truly vast presentation with commendable aplomb.

As a further bonus, the Elevation is also usefully forgiving of poorer-quality pressings. That underlying positivity to the way that it makes music seems to be able to minimise the problems that can affect some records. Impressively, as a counter to this, with truly first-class pressings, the Inspire is a fine performer. The effortlessness with which it goes about its business is something that makes it tremendously easy to listen to for long periods of time.

Conclusion

Picking out how the tonearm and the deck divide these roles and attributes isn't the easiest task in the world, but a series of tests with different cartridges seems to suggest that the liveliness that the Elevation demonstrates here is largely attributable to the arm that comes supplied with the deck being a commendably neutral performer. The vast array of arms that conform to Rega geometry means that if you want to keep the more matter-of-fact aspect of the deck unmodified, you probably won't have to look too far, but there is a lot to be said for the all-Inspire pairing as a happy mix between accuracy and entertainment. The testing with other cartridges does suggest, though, that good (very good in fact) though the Ortofon is, much of the performance of the Elevation can be unlocked by utilising less expensive cartridges.

If the luxury of working out just how much you need to spend on a cartridge is the most onerous buying task ahead of you when choosing an Elevation, then it should be clear by now that this is a deeply impressive turntable. Inspire has taken good raw materials and sound design practise to produce a consistently capable turntable that works well with a huge variety of music and that should compliment a range of different systems extremely well. **ES**

There's no dust cover included, but with a deck this beautiful why would you want to cover it?



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Open, involving and accurate sound. Solid build; good looks
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: No dust protection; not quite as accomplished with small-scale recordings
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A well thought-out and very potent deck with a real-world price tag
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL





Pro-Ject RPM 1 Carbon

With its rather distinctive, minimalist design, the Pro-Ject RPM 1 Carbon is available in striking red, white and black high gloss finishes. It will certainly add an air of modern elegance to any hi-fi setup and has a real feel of quality about it.

The motor is mounted to the side of the platter and the drive is taken from the pulley to the circumference of the platter via the belt. The motor sits inside a hole in the plinth, but doesn't touch it. It stands on your equipment support and so is completely decoupled from the deck itself, apart from the drive belt, which runs around the platter's circumference. This motor is of a similar design to the one used on the more expensive Xpression Carbon and is powered by an AC generator connected to a DC power supply. The 33 and 45rpm speeds are selected by moving the belt between the two pulleys of different diameters on the motor. The platter is made from MDF and is supplied with a felt mat. The main bearing is an inverted design with a ceramic ball to minimise friction.

The S-shaped tonearm has a fixed headshell and is made from a one-piece carbon fibre and aluminium resin construct that is manufactured using special heat and pressure treatments. It is fitted with a magnetic anti-skating device of a new design. The counterweight utilises TPE damping in the form of an anti-resonant ring around the fixing

point. At the business end, the arm is fitted with an Ortofon 2M Red moving magnet cartridge. The RCA phono connectors at the rear are connected directly to the cartridge, so a separate phono stage or dedicated phono input on an amplifier will additionally be required.

Sound quality

The sheer power and authority of the orchestra in Borodin's overture is totally captivating – so much so that I am compelled to flip the LP over and listen to some of Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. What strikes me most is the realism of the performance, and I almost jump out of my seat when the drum strikes and the trumpets blast. On balance, I feel the supplied Ortofon out-performs my Goldring reference cartridge.



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject RPM 1 Carbon
PRICE
£325
ORIGIN
Austria
TYPE
Belt-drive turntable
WEIGHT
3.8kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
380 x 110 x 350mm
FEATURES
• 33 & 45rpm
• S-shaped tonearm made from carbon
• Ortofon 2M Red MM cartridge
DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Designs
TELEPHONE
01235 511116
WEBSITE
henleydesigns.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 398

Changing to a bit of Simon and Garfunkel, I can hear the breath of Art Garfunkel during his solo section in *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. Then when the bass drum and backing orchestra comes in, there is no sense that the cartridge and arm are being overloaded and they take the crescendos in their stride.

The sax in Miles Davis' *So What* is incredibly clear and lifelike and yet does not swamp the drum accompaniment in any way. I get the feeling that the drums are being reproduced on a completely separate system. However, that's not to say that the music is not totally cohesive and well integrated.

By contrast, the driving techno rhythm in Laurent Garnier's *Desireless* is tight and beautifully controlled, which confirms the great marriage of the tonearm and cartridge. Vocal growls in the recording are perfectly projected in front of the soundstage, demonstrating the genuine three-dimensionality of the performance that is so well rendered by the Pro-Ject and has many of the characteristics of the company's more expensive turntable packages, which is quite an achievement. **NR**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Excellent build quality and superb tonearm/cartridge combination

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: A modern and elegant design resulting in a superb-sounding turntable



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aptX
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PACKAGE
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Speakers

Q Acoustics
2010i

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Save £66

GLOSS BLACK

Speakers

Q Acoustics
2020i

£129



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SOUND AND VISUAL
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STEREO SPEAKERS
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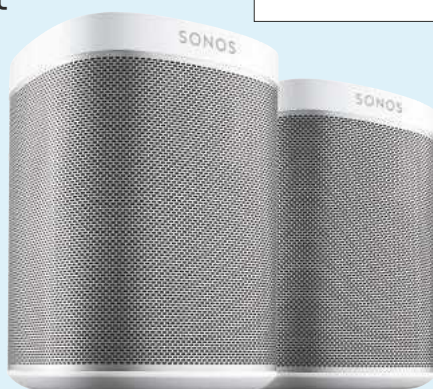
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Pro-Ject 2 Xperience SB DC

Sat at the top of the range, Pro-Ject's 2 Xperience SB DC package tries to match its beautiful looks with an enchanting sound

Right from the outset, I find myself impressed with the look and feel of the top-of-the-range model from Pro-Ject's Xperience turntables. It has an air of classic elegance and refinement. In particular, the lovely matt finish of the walnut wood veneer is a perfect complement to the black of the platter and the Pro-Ject 9CC Evolution carbon-fibre tonearm. This arm is fitted with an Ortofon 2M Silver moving magnet cartridge, which has already been fully aligned at the factory. As well as the walnut wood veneer, the 2 Xperience SB DC is available in mahogany or olive wood or in a gloss piano black finish. The turntable has some great design features. The plinth is made from a

special non-resonant MDF, which uses a combination of high density and lower density MDF in its construction. It is also fitted with three high-quality metal cone feet, each of which incorporates an acoustically damped coupling mechanism that sits between the foot and the plinth. These screw onto the underside of the plinth and can be adjusted to enable levelling of the turntable. The platter is also of a special sandwich construction to minimise resonances and provide an excellent acoustic match. Pro-Ject recommends that the record is placed directly on the platter *sans* mat. The new motor has electronic control of playback speed and the ability to switch between 33 and 45rpm at the push of a button. It is

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject
2 Xperience SB DC

PRICE
£1,050

ORIGIN
Austria

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
7.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
460 x 160 x 360mm

FEATURES
● 33 & 45rpm
● 9CC Evolution carbon-fibre tonearm
● Ortofon 2M Silver moving magnet cartridge

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Designs

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
henleydesigns.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 397

a 9V AC synchronous motor. The control circuit, which is built into the turntable, takes the 15V DC input from the external power supply and generates a high-purity sine wave of a frequency to drive the motor at the chosen speed. A single press of the power button turns the motor on to 33rpm and the left-hand blue LED flashes while the turntable gets up to speed and then stops flashing when it is ready, and remains lit. Another press of the button switches to 45rpm and the right blue LED is lit. Pressing the button again switches back to 33rpm. You press and hold the button for three seconds to turn the deck off.

Not hiding its light under a bushel, the motor is situated out in the open on the top left of the plinth. From there, the drive is taken from the motor pulley to the outer rim of the platter via a circular cross-section drive belt. The motor itself is suspended in its recess by another small rubber belt to effectively isolate it from the plinth.

The top of the spindle is threaded to accommodate a screw-on metal record clamp that is provided with the platter. The clamp is quite light, weighing only 85g, but as it screws onto the spindle, it holds the record firmly in position on the platter.

Moving to the business end, the arm is Pro-Ject's 9CC Evolution carbon-



The design is typical of Pro-Ject's understated simplicity

fibre 9in offering, which has been designed to lead vibrations away from the cartridge into the mounting board. The headshell, finger-lift and armtube are fashioned from a single piece of carbon-fibre and the armtube itself is slightly tapered along its length to minimise standing wave reflections. The arm bearing housing is a heavy solid ring that supports an inverted bearing design with four ABEC7 specification ballraces. The counterbalance weight is Sorbothane damped and supported on a pillar that extends from the bottom of the armtube in order to lower the centre of mass and thus reduce unwanted forces on the cantilever. It should be noted that, even though the headshell is fixed, the armtube is clamped by a single screw to allow rotation should any adjustment of needle azimuth be required. Bias adjustment is by a small weight suspended from a wire hoop in a nylon thread, which is connected to the arm by looping the end of the thread over a little pillar that has three grooves on it, with each corresponding to different stylus forces.

At the sharp end of the arm is a factory-fitted Ortofon 2M Silver moving magnet cartridge. This is based on the Ortofon 2M Red, but the internal generator coils are made from silver wire. The signal from this

cartridge is taken to a block on the rear underside of the deck that is fitted with a pair of RCA phono sockets and an earth binding post. A set of dual phono leads with a separate earth wire is also included.

The only adjustment required is to set the stylus force after the counterbalance weight has been fitted. The instructions describe how to set the tracking force using the markings on the counterweight, but I prefer to use a digital stylus force balance to do this as it is far more accurate. I check the azimuth and VTA and I find them to be spot on.

I check the tracking ability and arm/cartridge resonance with my copy of the Vinyl Essentials test record. The arm and cartridge tracks well up to 80 microns and the resonance is at 12Hz, which is great.

Delivers a superb sonic backdrop with an excellent dynamic range

Sound quality

Starting off with the overture from Purcell's *Abdelazer Suite* played by the Virtuosi of England – the stately allegro overture immediately commands my attention and draws me into the music. I am struck by the clear musicality of the performance – the orchestra is both full and yet well controlled with no audible peaks across the sonic spectrum, which supports the measured performance mentioned previously.

The deep and extended drum roll during the opening sequence of Stravinsky's *The Firebird Suite* performed by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra is beautifully clean, tight and well controlled. Further into the recording, the twittering of the strings is clear and crisp – I can almost identify the individual violins as separate instruments, rather than being one general sound.

For more contemporary electronic music, I turn to a track from Jean Michel Jarre's *Equinoxe*. The last track on side one (called *Part 4*) gently introduces me to the pumping bass line that builds up through the piece. The Pro-Ject delivers a superb sonic backdrop with an excellent dynamic range, particularly in the lower registers. It carries off to perfection all the complexities of the music and the energetic enthusiasm is captivating.

The King's Singers rendition of *With You On My Mind* shows off the

excellent imaging of the 2 Xperience SB DC. Each singer occupies his own space across the soundstage and the rhythm accompaniment is correctly positioned behind them. The rich tonal colours of each singer that emerges are very addictive.

George Malcolm's playing on a Decca Eclipse recording of Scarlatti sonatas on a harpsichord is tuneful and energetic. The Pro-Ject manages to extract a considerable amount of complexity and detail from the single harpsichord, and at times it is difficult to believe that there is only one instrument playing.

Finally, for a bit of rock, I turn to the legendary Mobile Fidelity half-cut master (ie the master disc is cut at half speed) recording of *Money* from *The Dark Side Of The Moon*. The bass guitar is reproduced with exceptional musicality and the cash registers glitter with clarity, causing me to instinctively reach for my wallet. As with the King's Singers recording, the lyrics are clear and the slight raspiness of Pink Floyd's vocals is perfectly reproduced.

Conclusion

The Pro-Ject 2 Xperience SB DC turntable turns in a performance that complements its looks – one of elegance and refinement. I never get the feeling that it is looking down its nose at me and it is certainly ready to let its hair down when asked.

The combination of the Ortofon 2M Silver cartridge and the 9CC Evolution tonearm is a marriage made in heaven and I find no reason to break up this happy partnership. Their performance together is one of control and harmony, combined with freedom of expression that simply allows the music to flow.

As a complete package, the 2 Xperience SB DC is a serious turntable that will certainly let you fully appreciate everything that your vinyl collection has to offer. **NR**

HI-FI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Great build quality; superb tonearm/cartridge combination

DISLIKE: The screw-on record clamp

WESAY: Classic elegance combined with modern tech results in a superb-sounding turntable



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Pro-Ject Essential II Digital

One of the things most likely to put off newcomers to vinyl is the additional expense of needing to purchase a dedicated phono stage as many amplifiers are not fitted with one. Pro-Ject's Essential II Digital neatly sidesteps this problem by having one built in and ready to connect to any spare line-level input. It features a built-in moving magnet phono stage based on Pro-Ject's Phono Box design.

The 8.6in aluminium tonearm has a damped cueing lever and is factory fitted with an Ortofon OM5e moving magnet cartridge. The turntable is supported on three adjustable feet. It is fitted with a heavy MDF black platter and a black felt platter mat is also supplied.

Sound quality

To kick off the listening test I select Handel's *Organ Concerto No. 1* in G minor. The orchestra is full, without being overblown. The bass is well extended, yet tight and this is particularly evident in the organ passages. The top end is clear and crisp, without sounding harsh. The strings are rounded and flowing, but the brass is strident as it should be. Not bad for a deck and phono stage costing just over £300.

Next up is a bit of Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio Italien* played by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. This is an exuberant presentation, and the kettle drums in the closing section

give my speaker drivers plenty of exercise. I feel the Essential II Digital is in total control at all times. The soundstage does have a little less front-to-back depth at times and I get the impression that the musicians have moved their chairs a bit closer together than I am used to hearing.

A recording of Thelma Houston's *To Know You Is To Love You* is sparkling clear and open. The Pro-Ject delivers a perfectly balanced performance with the energetic enthusiasm of the singing combined with the laid-back orchestral accompaniment on *Pressure Cooker*.

Jazz meets baroque with Raymond Fol's jazz version of a Vivaldi classic – *The Four Seasons In Jazz*. The trumpet solos are clear and strident, without being abrasive and the performance is conveyed with great energy and gusto, especially during the allegros. The guitar playing in the second movement of *Spring* is very moving and captivating.

So much for the analogue line output, but how about the digital out? Although the Essential II Digital sports a respectable 24-bit/96kHz ADC, this is only available via an optical output. In order to test this facility, I connect a Toslink cable to the optical input of a Cambridge Audio Stream Magic V2 (HFC 393) streamer and the optical output of the turntable and repeat all of the previous tests. I must confess that I anticipate a slight degradation in sound quality due to the additional

signal processing required, but I can't detect any discernible difference in quality compared with the line out.

The Essential II Digital punches well above its price point. Its modern styling, clever design and the combination of a line-level analogue output and a digital output means that this turntable is about as 'plug and play' as you could ever hope for from a record deck. The combination of Ortofon OM5e cartridge and Pro-Ject aluminium tonearm works really well together.

On the down side, it's a shame not to see a coaxial and/or USB digital output included, as this would considerably enhance the versatility of the deck. Also, the omission of a bypass switch to allow it to be used with an external phono stage seems a bit of an oversight.

Ultimately, the Essential II Digital lives up to its billing, and is equipped with all the essentials to enable it to be easily added to an existing music system. It allows new or returning vinyl fans to discover and experience the format without the need to fundamentally change their existing setup, and so makes a great starter deck for budding vinylistas. **NR**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject Essential II Digital

PRICE
£309

ORIGIN
Austria

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable with MM phono stage & ADC

WEIGHT
4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
420 x 112 x 330mm

FEATURES
• 33 & 45rpm
• 8.6in aluminium tonearm
• Ortofon OM5e moving magnet cartridge

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Designs

TELEPHONE
01235 511166

WEBSITE
henleydesigns.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 401

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Sound quality; easy set up; excellent value for money

DISLIKE: Lack of digital coax or USB outputs; can't bypass internal phono stage

WE SAY: Smart and modern-looking turntable that performs well above its price

Simply the Best



Sendor D7

Among the finest speakers I've heard at any price
Sam Tellig, Stereophile Nov 2014

Sendor's approach is the most radical I've seen, going where no hi-fi manufacturer has gone before. D7 is extremely capable and very neutral, but most importantly it puts the music first
Hi-Fi + Dec 2013

If you're after a great all-round, affordable, high end loudspeaker, here it is
Hi-Fi Choice issue 370 2014

D7 has an unmistakeable touch of magic. Easy to drive, genuinely efficient, undemanding of placement, fine stereo, extended powerful bass, upbeat and well-balanced, build and finish first rate. What more can one ask?
Hi-Fi Critic Sep 2013

However it's been achieved, we can't help but marvel at the sound from the D7's. Sendor D7's set the standard for speakers at this price
What Hi-Fi Oct 2013

Bass punch allied to tremendous mid band and treble insight makes for a winning combination
Hi-Fi World Jul 2014



NEW Sendor A5R



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little speaker
Hi-Fi + Sep 2015

Outstanding
Hi-Fi World Oct 2015



Sendor D1

SPENDOR

www.spendoraudio.com



Rega

RP1 Performance

With a hi-fi heritage spanning several decades, Rega is the name that undoubtedly comes to mind when considering British turntables and tonearms. Its classic Planar turntable dates back to the seventies and was a budget belt-drive deck employing a solid plinth instead of the suspended chassis that was used in many quality turntables from the early sixties onwards. Keeping with tradition, Rega's latest entry-level RP1 turntable is also a solid plinth and is supplied in the Performance Pack upgraded version as seen here, which includes a Bias 2 moving magnet cartridge, an upgraded drive belt and a 100 percent natural wool turntable mat.

The plinth is available in three finishes – cool grey, white or titanium. The platter is made from a phenolic resin to give it a flywheel effect to improve instantaneous speed stability, but it still feels a little lightweight. It sits on a standard Rega plastic sub-platter that is driven by an upgraded drive belt to enhance speed stability and accuracy, as part of the Performance Pack upgrade. The speed change between 33 and 45rpm is manual and the platter has to be removed to move the drive belt across the two motor pulleys. Although basic, it feels nicely engineered. For example, a very high-quality precision main bearing is used, taken from Rega's more expensive models. It is pre-lubricated and the sub-platter

takes about a minute to settle into the bearing when removed and replaced, indicating a tight tolerance between the bearing and the spindle shaft.

The supplied arm is the RB101, which is Rega's new entry-level offering with a simple machined arm tube and bonded headshell, and replaces the legendary RB100. The Rega Bias 2 moving magnet cartridge is fitted with an elliptical stylus. The RP1 will need to be connected to a phono stage or amplifier phono input configured for use with a moving magnet cartridge.

Sound quality

Starting with Stravinsky's *The Firebird*, the drum strikes are very powerful, but a tad less real than with my Goldring reference cartridge. Moving on to a Borodin overture,



DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega RP1
Performance Pack

PRICE
£298

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Belt-drive turntable

WEIGHT
7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
450 x 120 x 360mm

FEATURES
• 33 & 45rpm
• Rega RB101
tonearm
• Rega Bias 2 MM
cartridge

DISTRIBUTOR
Rega Research

TELEPHONE
01702 333071

WEBSITE
rega.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 398

I find the choir is nicely situated behind the orchestra and the performance is smooth and melodic.

Art's vocal solo with piano on *Bridge Over Troubled Water* seems slightly recessed and the high-frequency detail is just a little restrained. Having said that, I consider the performance, to be very musical indeed and generally effortless. Likewise, Miles Davis' trumpet is somehow both strident but not shrill or, dare I say it, brassy. The Bias 2 seems very much in its element with jazz and I am drawn into the performance and the music flows along effortlessly. I have the stereo version of this recording and the image spread between the speakers is really good and the instrument focus is spot on, showing excellent stereo imaging.

Letting my hair down, Laurent Garnier's *Desireless* is full of energy, but I find the high squeals are more recessed. For example, the subtle tinkling of the triangle in *Back To My Roots* is almost lost in everything else that is going on. Nevertheless, when the heavy bass kicks in, it manages to make the woofers in my loudspeakers move some air and massage my kneecaps – great stuff. **NR**

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Good build quality; sound; engineering

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: The need to remove the platter to change the speed is a minor irritation

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Classic styled budget turntable with excellent sound

FEATURES



OVERALL



Lehmannaudio Black Cube

ON THE BASE of the Black Cube are small DIP switches to configure it for a range of settings, with 47kohm (100pF) for MM and high-output MC pick-ups, and 100ohm/1kohm settings for low and mid output MCs, while a third setting lets you select a custom load by installing your own resistors on its dual mono circuit board. Removing the lid via four screws gives access to more customisable features, including adjusting the MM's +46dB gain and MC's +66dB gain by -10dB each, with more jumper options to activate a bass roll-off filter and bridge its output capacitors.

Sound quality

As soon as the needle hits the groove I can hear that the Lehmannaudio is able to conjure up an expansive and open soundstage. But it's not just the size of the sonic landscape

that it produces that is of merit, where its strengths also lie is in how it enables instruments and voices to work together as a cohesive whole, which really brings the music to life. The way Brett and Rennie Sparks' vocals in the Handsome Family's *Singing Bones* separate into the left and right channels before being joined back together at the centre of the soundstage largely pass me by with the other phono stages that go up against the Black Cube in the *Group Test* in which it appeared as simply a quirk in the mix to keep me on my toes. But with the Lehmannaudio in the driving seat, I can hear how this technique subtly reveals each voice to complement the other as it brings their unique tonalities to life, more so than any of the other phono preamps in the roundup.

Perhaps revealing its pro audio origins, it majors on a clean sound



and its talents are also shown in its ability to clearly define instruments. On cheaper rival phono stages, the lead guitars on the Pixies' *Wave Of Mutilation* sound rich and suitably dense, but not that well separated. Via the Lehmannaudio each chord change and riff is better defined and revealing, with sharper leading edges and a more balanced sustain and decay. At the extremes and when being driven hard via an Ortofon cartridge, it can lean towards emphasising the sibilance in Frank Black's voice, but this is a very minor dent in what is otherwise a superb all-round performance. **AS**

DETAILS

PRICE
£400
TYPE
MM/MC phono stage
TELEPHONE
01235 511166
WEBSITE
henleydesigns.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 394

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Lounge Audio LCR MkIII

MY FIRST IMPRESSIONS of this phono stage from USA-based Lounge Audio are very favourable, thanks in part to its simple and elegant looks. The unit provides a 50kohm 100pF load for the moving magnet cartridge and it emits a subtle blue glow from the acrylic layer just beneath the lid when powered up. There is no on/off switch on the unit and should you wish to use the phono stage with a moving coil cartridge, you will need to purchase a pair of moving coil step-up transformers of a suitable impedance to match your cartridge, or indeed a matching Lounge Copla moving coil step-up amplifier.

Sound quality

I connect up a Goldring 2400 moving magnet cartridge to the input of the phono stage and lower the stylus onto Simon and Garfunkel's *Cecilia*. First

impressions are that there is certainly plenty going on – all the lines of activity in the recording are beautifully presented and clear. The pumping bass drum is tight, punchy and well controlled and there is no sibilance to the vocals. Front-to-back and side-to-side imaging is also fantastic.

Moving on to something more intimate in the form of some chamber music, I turn to a recording of Beethoven's *Piano Trio In E Flat Major, Op. 1 No. 1* played by the George Malcolm Trio. The piano, which is always a challenging test for an audio system, is spot-on. The tonal balance is perfect, in that it sounds like a concert piano. It is not tinny like an upright or muffled as though being played with the lid closed. The overall performance of the piano,

cello and violin is spicy and exciting with great intimacy and clarity – really honest and engaging.

Finishing off with a full orchestra, JS Bach's *Triple Concerto In A Minor for Harpsichord, Flute, Violin and Strings* by the Stuttgart Soloists is equally impressive. The strings are smooth and refined, the flute solos are clear and the whole performance is harmonious and sparkling. There seems to be plenty of air around each instrument and the music sounds very authentic.

To conclude, the LCR MkIII is a fantastic performer with a very competitive price tag. **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE
£429
TYPE
MM phono stage
TELEPHONE
01536 762211
WEBSITE
divineaudio.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 403

OUR VERDICT

★★★★★

Renaissance Amplification

RP-02



DETAILS

PRICE
£749
TYPE
MM/MC phono stage
TELEPHONE
0203 5442338
WEBSITE
nunudistribution.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 401

OUR VERDICT



IF YOU'RE LOOKING for a phono stage that makes a statement, look no further than the bright metallic pinky-red aluminium case of the RP-02. Those with more conservative taste will be pleased to know it's also available in black. The front panel houses the blue LED power indicator and an on/off switch, and the rear has an IEC power socket, earth binding post and four gold-plated RCA phono sockets for input and output. There's also a jumper array for choosing the impedance to match the moving magnet or moving coil cartridge on your deck.

Sound quality

I connect the RP-02 into my system and feed it from the Kiseki Blue NOS MC cartridge that is installed in my tonearm. First up is a brilliant EMI recording of Haydn's *Baryton Trios*.

The unique sound that results from the instrument's sympathetically resonating strings is beautifully conveyed and I find that I'm drawn into the performance. The energy and enthusiasm of the musicians is both irresistible and captivating.

Next up is Anthony Mawer's *Poem Once Remembered*. The mournful opening with the unaccompanied guitar flows into the flute, which takes over the melody. The bass line brings everything together well, although the extreme lows are slightly lighter than I'd expect, but this will inevitably help to keep any sub-sonic rumble in check.

Moving on to a full orchestra, there's nothing quite like Rimsky-Korsakov's

Scheherazade for pushing a system. The violin solos are clear and not edgy or harsh and the full orchestral sections are dynamic and spacious. At no time does it feel like the RP-02 is being pushed close to its limits.

I finish off with a jazz version of Bach classics played by Pierre Gossez on his *Come Bach* LP. This is a mono recording, but still manages to convey an air of openness and clarity with incredible energy.

The RP-02 stands out – visually and in terms of its flexibilities. It performs well straight from the box, but can also be tweaked to closely match the specific characteristics of your turntable's cartridge. **NR**

Vincent

PHO-700



MATCHING STURDY BUILD

with no-nonsense design, the PHO-700 works with both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges, and has a rear panel switch to toggle between them. Vincent claims an input sensitivity of 58mV for MM and 6.8mV for MC, which should mean that few people experience compatibility issues. Input impedance is quoted at a pretty standard 47kohm and 100ohm respectively. The signal-to-noise ratio claimed for it is also impressive at 81dB (MM) and 69dB (MC), if not quite the best you'll see.

Sound quality

Here's a smooth and sweet-sounding phono stage that belies its relatively modest price. I try a range of cartridges from an Audio-Technica AT-95E moving magnet to a Lyra Dorian moving coil and find it has grace, space and pace. Kate Bush's *Running Up That Hill* serves up a

spacious recorded acoustic (running wide stage left and right) with a fulsome bass from this tonally dry production. The music flows well and I am struck by the purity of her icily beautiful voice.

Feed it some faster-paced rock, such as *So It Goes* by Nick Lowe, and you get a highly impressive sound for such a modest phono stage. Where some rivals are dour and unengaging, the Vincent's adrenaline is pumping and it really enjoys itself. Bass is punchy and surprisingly weighty for the price, and the midband crisp and detailed. I love the way it communicates the propulsive rhythm guitar work and the pounding snare drums with such aplomb. In absolute terms, there's a slight softening of dynamics, but this is allied to its naturally warm nature so you can turn the volume up and enjoy things even more.

Despite being a strong performer across all musical genres, feed the PHO-700 with some smooth soul

music or jazz, and it is at its very best. Rose Royce's *Wishing On A Star* is beautifully recorded and the PHO-700 easily reveals this, sounding spectacular for a product of this price. It has the ability to show great control, yet lets the music flow in a subtle and effusive way which doesn't lose any of the rhythmic nuances of the playing. Again, vocal timbre proves superb, the lead singer's fulsome yet fragile voice being deftly handled and full of emotion. Overall then, this is an excellent affordable two-box phono stage, which is well able to compete with its rivals and give nothing away. Well worth an audition. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£549
TYPE
MM/MC phono stage
TELEPHONE
01623 844478
WEBSITE
the-missing-link.net
REVIEWED
HFC 403

OUR VERDICT



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what type of music
you choose to listen to"**



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May 2015
Revolution XT6F



July 2015
Revolution XT8F



August 2015
Revolution XT6F



November 2015
Revolution XT8F

Denon DA-300USB



DETAILS

PRICE
£329

TYPE
USB and S/PDIF
DAC/headphone
preamp

WEBSITE
denon.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 393

OUR VERDICT



NOT ONLY IS this DAC beautifully styled and well built, but it can be positioned horizontally or vertically, adding a useful degree of flexibility when placing it beside a desktop computer or hi-fi. Helpfully, the display auto flips to the correct position too. It's a nice touch, but more interesting for hi-res music fans is the 32-bit/192kHz onboard DAC that uses the same 'Advanced AL32 audio processing' as found on most of Denon's CD players.

On the front there's a 6.35mm headphone socket with volume control, and connectivity around the back runs to asynchronous USB-B, S/PDIF coaxial and optical inputs. Stereo RCAs are on hand for connection to a hi-fi amplifier.

The DA-300USB features universal file format support for PCM and DSD (the native file format for SACD) digital audio signals on the USB-B input for bit-transparent, asynchronous playback of digital

music. A plug-and-play approach is adopted for Macs, but Windows users are required to download and install Denon's driver software.

Sound quality

First impressions on playing the test tracks are good, and I am struck by the well balanced performance with no single element sounding out of place or seeking attention over another. It's perhaps not the richest sound in terms of bass performance, and has a touch of leanness when compared with the Geek Out (below), but it's all of a piece and serves the track up with a lively amount of dynamic energy that rocks out when hooked up to a hi-fi.

Vocals have a delicacy that makes listening feel that bit more intimate,



meaning that Kate Bush's piano has a fluidity and naturalness to it that is effortlessly conveyed on a 24/96 version of *Snowflake*.

Where the Denon differs from rivals is in its ability to open up a recording and allow you to listen right into the mix. Play a 24/192 version of Madonna's *Live To Tell*, for example, and you can hear the decay of the drums far more clearly, and the upper registers of vocals and percussion exhibit greater resolution with a sense of sparkle that never becomes harsh or fatiguing.

Pleasingly, the other digital inputs handle all digital sources in an equally musical manner. **LD**

LH Labs Geek Out M

POSITIONED IN THE middle of three miniature USB DACs, the Geek Out M hails from seriously high-end Da Vinci Audio. It has an impressive back story that saw the original Geek Out EM model born from a swell of support following its crowdfunding campaign. The diamond black M model here has a claimed 720mW power output suitable for less efficient headphones within the 100-300ohm range. Silver and Red models are available with power outputs tailored towards different efficiency headphones.

Despite its tiny size, it packs one heck of a lot into its remarkable dimensions. There are two tiny buttons on the side and a USB plug at the end, plus a pair of 3.5mm jack sockets labelled 47ohm and 0.47ohm at the other. Much of the tech is derived from the remarkable Da Vinci DAC including the 32-bit/384kHz and DSD64/128 decoding and the Class A amplifier.

The general look and finish is not up to the highest standards and the tiny LED lights showing up the sampling frequency of what's being played can be difficult to decipher as you have to flip the unit over for the key. Pressing the two buttons on the side activates the '3D Awesomifier', to give an expanded "out of the head" listening experience, but I'm more interested in how it sounds without any gimmicks.

Sound quality

Plugging the Geek Out into my MacBook Pro and hooking up the 3.5mm line output jack to a hi-fi amp, it sounds far better than any audio product this size has a right to. Playing the first few notes of *Snowed In At Wheeler Street*, I quickly realise I've struck gold. The piano sounds amazingly sumptuous with Kate Bush and Elton John's vocals remarkably rich and detailed. Music seems more 'alive' somehow and Stevie Wonder's *Inversions* has faultless timing that

expertly balances bass rhythm, smooth vocals and percussion with the kind of performance standards that are more often associated with full-size, high-end components.

Pink Floyd's *Take It Back* is a lively track, but again the scale and space surrounding each of the instruments highlights the high-quality of the well engineered recording allowing all the elements in the mix to sit in their own space, giving you a fantastic insight into the recording that means you can pick out and follow specific instruments with ease and accuracy. **LD**



DETAILS

PRICE
£249

TYPE
Hub-powered USB
DAC/headphone
preamp

WEBSITE
anthemavs.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 393

OUR VERDICT





IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

DALI RUBICON Series

- Innovation in Audio



True music-lovers want their listening experience to come to life every time! The DALI RUBICON range is the perfect union of striking design and sound engineering expertise – two strands that run deep in both DALI's and Denmark's DNA. The result is a musical experience beyond expectation, reproduction as close to the artist's original intention as possible, and an overall aural experience that will elate.



Learn more about the RUBICON range at www.dali-rubicon.com

Chord Electronics Chordette 2Qute



THE 2QUTE REPLACES Chord's Qute EX, and has the Hugo's (HFC 386) insides. It supports up to 32/384 audio via coaxial and USB digital inputs, and 24/192 over optical. It plays PCM and DSD (with DSD64 via all inputs and DSD128 via coaxial or USB, all via DoP). The Class 2 USB input has been galvanically isolated, and the switch to toggle between inputs is easier to use. Chord says that the circuit board has been completely redesigned from the Hugo, to take advantage of its new casework and the lack of a need to provide mobile features such as volume control, Bluetooth and batteries.

Like its predecessors and all of the Chordette series, the 2Qute comes in a beautiful, small, brushed aluminium case. As well as being innovatively styled, it's extremely strong. The downside is that it's not as intuitive to use as rivals and you'll need to read the instructions to understand the meaning of the coloured lights.

This is quite simply one of the best-sounding DACs at or near its price. It is very similar to the Hugo, offering a near-identical sound, one that's better in some ways and not quite as good in others. It is highly musical, with a great sense of timing and dynamics, and doesn't achieve this by sounding tonally forward or aggressive.

Sound quality

The 2Qute sounds superb across all digital sources, at whatever resolution you care to feed it. It has an almost magical ability to make CDs sound animated, energetic and expressive.

I cue up a Cyrus CD Xt Signature CD transport (HFC 386) via the coaxial digital input with *Along Comes Mary* by The Association. This sounds very average via most digital converters. Though it might appear clean and detailed, there's an underlying sterility

and flatness. The 2Qute transcends this with a performance that's intense, musically immersive and highly impressive in a hi-fi sense.

You can run the gamut of formats – CD or hi-res, PCM or DSD – and the result is the same. The 2Qute is unerringly musical with a lovely, rich tonality to it that makes it a pleasure to listen to. It doesn't quite have the last one percent or so of the Hugo's midband detail, but it more than compensates with more power down below. Hear it and discover for yourself just how great it is. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£995

TYPE
USB and S/PDIF
DAC

WEBSITE
chordelectronics.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 402

OUR VERDICT



Mass Fidelity Relay

HAILING FROM CANADA, Mass Fidelity's Relay DAC is an aptX-capable design that decodes via a Burr-Brown PCM5102 and Cirrus Logic processor. AAC decoding is also supported, which means it is backwards compatible with less capable variants of Bluetooth as well.

In connectivity terms, it initially looks like Mass Fidelity has dropped the ball as the rear panel only sports a pair of RCA phonos. However, if you hold down the power button for five seconds, these outputs neatly become a pair of S/PDIF connections allowing the Relay to be connected directly to a DAC.

Sound quality

With the rear outputs set to analogue, the performance with lossless files delivers on the promise of aptX. There is nothing in the way of audible compression or elevated noise floor, meaning that Røysopp's *The Inevitable End*, is delivered with

plenty of detail and an impressive sense of scale. The pounding bassline of *Monument* is deep, well defined and very powerful.

Across this and more refined music, the Relay is consistently forgiving even with less than stellar mastering. It has the useful ability to pick out fine detail while simultaneously avoiding harshness and aggression.

The splendid but flawed Royal Blood debut album benefits from this helping of civility and still retains the slight brutality that makes it what it is. Being extremely critical, the performance can lack a little sense of soundstage across the speakers and can sound slightly matter of fact.

Switching the outputs to digital and connecting the Relay to a Naim ND5 XS reveals it to be as transparent as one might hope. Used in this way it effectively becomes a Bluetooth dongle and will perform exactly as the DAC it is connected to does. The output is stable and none of the

digital inputs I connect it to show any signs of dropout or locking issues, which suggests that however the switch between analogue and digital is implemented, it doesn't show any signs of being a bodge job.

This is an exceptionally well thought out piece of equipment that gets an awful lot right. If you have an aptX Bluetooth source, you can secure a performance that is competitive with UPnP and AirPlay and that has to rank as one of the most stable and effective Bluetooth implementations I've had the pleasure to use. **ES**



DETAILS

PRICE
£180

TYPE
Bluetooth DAC

TELEPHONE
01825 750858

WEBSITE
anthemavs.co.uk;
massfidelity.com

REVIEWED
HFC 394

OUR VERDICT





Tackle these system assassins – or your “upgrade” path will hit the buffers, and cost a fortune

UPGRADE
A DIFFERENT WAY
– DON'T BUY
COMPONENTS!
Read on ...

There are two pernicious, pervasive, unseen evils that lurk within all hifi systems, created by the system, and the damage they do is MASSIVE.

What are these assassins?

RF Interference: from mobile, TV and radio transmissions, also mains-borne – especially damaging in digital replay – that adds a hard, aggressive edge to treble and destroys imaging. It must be absorbed.

Vibration that's created *within the system* by the speakers and power supplies. Then it's carried everywhere by the metal cables, destroying detail, bloating bass and trashing timing.

Isolation is *not* the answer because it traps the vibration within the system. Instead it must be absorbed and drained away harmlessly.

Solution: a range of cables, mains blocks and wood-encased products from Vertex AQ, most of which absorb and drain both RFI and vibration.

Like carbon monoxide, you won't see, feel or smell them but hear them you will. Unless you defeat them all your efforts to “upgrade” will be sticking plasters on the symptoms, rarely dealing with the causes.

Examples: You play mostly CDs or stream from a hard drive but there's a hard, tiring edge to the sound and it becomes “too loud” if you turn up the volume. Imaging is also limited.

Classic RFI problems, because some of the RF is merging with the music data and it's all being decoded together. The signal is corrupted and information is lost.

RFI is very intrusive and hard to banish, even with shielded cables, BUT had you thought of the mains input to hard drives and switches, especially from “wall warts”?

Insert a Yushan and prepare to be shocked!

Both streaming and CD suffer from internal vibration that generates spurious signals. They add a “haze” and also interact with the music signal, destroying detail, imaging and timing. Bass is bloated and boomy.

LeadingEdge platforms containing Vertex's vibration and RFI-absorbing labyrinth material work wonders in cleaning up these system assassins.

Yours is a mainly vinyl system (you don't like digital for the reasons above!) but you also suffer from a “fat”, slow bass. You like valve amps for their “warm” sound.

Cartridges are naturally very sensitive to vibration but, think, they are connected mechanically *directly* to the speakers through the cabling!

A Moncayo block inserted between the speakers and the amplifier will absorb vibration, producing deeper, tighter bass, better timing and liberating your sound stage. Valve amps also thrive on LE platforms as they are very microphonic.

Try before you buy – we're delighted to lend items.

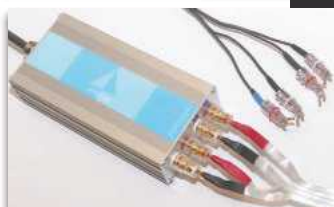
Customers say we make some of the best sounds in our studio they have ever heard, so you know we can do the same in your home. Our advice takes account of your best components and guides you where change is needed, in stages you can afford.

You avoid expensive mistakes, enjoy music and save money in the long run.

Just listen and you'll know



Vertex Yushan – an incredible RFI and vibration absorber



An ideal start is one of the three Taga distribution blocks. They filter RFI from the mains AND also absorb vibration, incoming from the mains and drained down the mains cables from equipment power supplies.

Why does that matter? – because you will aim to match components that have their own mirror-image characteristics to cancel the audible problems.

So you're aiming to cure one set of problems with your choice of more problems?! Have you thought what happens to system “balance” when you change a component?

Your system is teetering on wobbly foundations.

Digital: Aurender, Bel Canto, CEC, dCS, Vertex AQ dac. **Vinyl:** Graham, Spiral Groove, Transfiguration.

Tuners: Magnum Dynalab. **Amplifiers:** Bel Canto, Sonneteer, Storm Audio, Vitus, VTL.

Loudspeakers: Avalon, Kawero!, NEAT, Totem. **Cables:** Chord Co., DNM, Nordost, Siltech, Tellurium, Vertex AQ. **Mains:** Aletheia, Vertex AQ.

Supports: Arcici, Black Ravioli, Hi-Fi Racks, LeadingEdge, Stands Unique, Vertex AQ. **Room acoustics:** LeadingEdge

www.rightnote.co.uk

01225 874728





NAD

C 510 Direct Digital

The C 510 would be notable enough as a DAC given that it includes some connectivity I've not encountered before, but that is only half the story. It also has full volume control and has its sights set firmly on your preamp. To do this with any degree of transparency, it has to ensure that the level of the digital signal can be adjusted without affecting the content itself. Adjusting the level of digital by removing bits of it (literally bit reduction) is easy enough, but isn't a solution that will sound much good unless the volume is wide open. To get around this, the C 510 takes all signals and upsamples them to 35-bits. This additional information is passed through a CSRA6601 8-channel digital modulator, which sacrifices this additional information to provide level adjustment without the original content of the file – even up to 24/192 sample rates – being affected.

The advantage of this is that the NAD should sound the same at any of its 100 separate volume increments. Volume adjustment is swift and the large number of increments means you can set the level you actually want and not one you nearly want.

To make full use of this volume control, it has a useful collection of inputs. Most notable of these is a pair of HDMI. These are capable of receiving a stereo 24/192 signal and decoding it before passing the video to an HDMI output. With Blu-ray

audio always threatening to be another means of listening to hi-res, this is an interesting idea, but the omission of DSD support is a shame. These connections are joined by an asynchronous USB and a coaxial, S/PDIF and optical. The C 510 hooks up to an amplifier via XLR or RCA connections. There is no digital out.

Sound quality

Connected to a Cambridge Audio 651W power amp via XLR and running into Neat Momentum 4i speakers, the NAD makes a swift and compelling case that an entirely digital preamp need not be less characterful than an analogue one.

Kicking off with the ripped CD of Gary Jules' *Trading Snakeoil For Wolfickets*, it has an effortless and almost liquid quality to it. At times, the closest parallel that can be drawn is with a well-designed valve preamp. There is something about the space afforded to voices and instruments that is more reminiscent of tubes than serious digital processing. Vocals are rich, weighty and convincing. The accompanying guitar is tangibly real too, with a marvellous sense of decay to notes. Importantly, the C 510 lives up to NAD's promise of linear volume and fixed behaviour at all levels.

The spacious performance allows the C 510 to show off its detail retrieval as it is able to find incidental moments in recordings that capable and more costly rivals can miss. The clever part of this is that due to the

refinement and control, it never comes across as analytical or ruthless. There is plenty of information available all the time, but all it does is present it for your consideration, not ram it down your throat.

This refinement is not achieved at the expense of drive and impact, though. Switching to Regina Spektor's *Far*, it takes on *Dance Anthem Of The 80s* with speed, deftness and a genuine sense of fun.

NAD has achieved its design brief with the C 510 – it genuinely is an excellent preamp that happens to be digital, but none of this sheer ability has come at the expense of ironing the joy out of music. The clarity of the performance assists the sense of timing and agility, and the accuracy of the tonality is enough to ensure that the original emotion of the music is maintained throughout.

In control terms it behaves like a preamp and while I'm not completely convinced the balance of inputs is right, the ones that are there give a consistent performance. And it's the performance that makes this product special. This is a clear indicator that combining decoding and volume control isn't just convenient, it can also be sonically excellent. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
NAD C 510
Direct Digital

PRICE
£999

ORIGIN
Canada/China

TYPE
DAC/preamp

WEIGHT
4.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
435 x 99 x 309mm

FEATURES
• 35-bit upsampling
• 24/192kHz-capable
• 2x HDMI inputs
• XLR and RCA analogue outputs

DISTRIBUTOR
Sevenoaks Sound & Vision

TELEPHONE
01732 459555

WEBSITE
nadelectronics.com

REVIEWED
HFC 395

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
LIKE: Exceptional, very consistent performer; inputs; good value

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
DISLIKE: Limited coaxial and optical inputs; no DSD; looks

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
WESAY: Accomplished product that simplifies a digital system and boosts performance at the same time

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



EVERYTHING WILL BECOME CLEAR

EXPERIENCE THE REVEALING CHEMISTRY
OF A PURER PLATINUM





Wadia D122

Though it sits towards the lower end of Wadia's product lineup, the good news about the di122 is that the competitive price doesn't seem to undermine the spec. It is fitted with five digital inputs, two optical, two coaxial and a USB-B port. The coaxial and optical sockets are both 24-bit/192kHz-capable, while the USB implementation is able to pass 24/384kHz as well as DSD and DXD. This ticks pretty much all the format boxes one might expect and should mean that the Wadia is pretty much futureproof.

Internally, it is built around the increasingly ubiquitous ESS Sabre chip, in this case an ES9016S. This allows the Wadia to act as a preamp, which is actually something that it has been doing with products for some time. The volume adjustment is performed by upsampling the incoming signal and then shedding superfluous information rather than via the cruder bit reduction method, which augers well for use as a preamp. The decoded output is available via RCA and XLR and a front headphone socket. In use, the volume adjustment does mean that if you set the volume to 100 percent, the output is high compared with a conventional line-level component and I find that backing the volume off improves the performance considerably.

Sound quality

Where many recent digital products have an almost analogue warmth to the way they make music, the Wadia is something altogether more forensic and focussed. There is a huge amount of information that's extracted from

material and it displays all of it in an exceptionally vivid and lively way.

The most noticeable aspect of this is when you listen to something with a bit of drive to it. Where some rivals seem content to let the music happen, the Wadia is committed to delivering every last facet of the performance in a manner that is startlingly vivid. Neither is this the preserve of faster, more aggressive material. With Jon Allen's languid *Deep River*, it is still determined to nail every note and nuance to the picosecond it happens.

If this sounds a little aggressive, the clever part of the presentation is that it manages to balance this sense of get up and go with a refinement that makes it a very satisfying long-term listen. With both a Naim Supernait 2 and Musical Fidelity M6si (HFC 400), the Wadia is a very civilised partner. It can't be provoked with anything but the poorest and most compressed material and even then, the volume has to be up at the firmly antisocial side of things. I am sure that really careless system matching might serve to exacerbate this, but a cursory demonstration beforehand should be sufficient to avoid it.

Switch to hi-res material and the di122 doesn't change the overall presentation, but it does reveal a further step up in the vividness of the performance. A 24/96 version of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* is exceptionally lifelike. There is a real sense of the performers, their relationship to one another and the space they inhabit. This is matched by believable tonality and an impressive sense of decay to notes all underpinned by bass that is deep, fast and tonally detailed. DSD material

remains limited, but the Wadia has no issue playing it and save for a lengthy pause when changing sample rate or format, it makes a compelling high-resolution companion.

Using it as a preamp and headphone amplifier does not alter the basics of the performance too significantly. The slight lack of fine adjustment to the volume favours rivals with a rotary dial, but there is no real sense that it is anything other than a very linear performer at every increment.

The news is rather better using the di122 as a headphone amp. Not only is there plenty of power on tap, but the comprehensive detail retrieval combined with the general refinement of the design makes the headphone socket far more than just a convenience feature.

It is this neat balance of convenience and capability that makes the di122 a very impressive proposition at this price point. If we accept that a rotary volume dial-equipped challenger will make the best device for use as a preamp, the Wadia hits back thanks to a genuinely useful set of real-world inputs and outputs, a full house of supported formats and a sound that is consistently and genuinely exciting. **ES**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Wadia di122

PRICE
£1,500

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
DAC/preamp

WEIGHT
3.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
254 x 80 x 356mm

FEATURES

- Inputs: 2x coaxial; 2x optical; 1x USB-B
- Outputs: RCA/XLR; 6.35mm headphone jack
- Supports up to 32-bit/384kHz (PCM), DSD64 & 128, DXD352.8kHz & DXD384kHz

DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds

TELEPHONE
0208 9713909

WEBSITE
wadia.com

REVIEWED
HFC 400

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Lively and powerful sound; build; features and facilities

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Slightly clunky interface; requires a little care when system matching

BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



WE SAY: A very clever and highly capable arrival from a long-time digital master

OVERALL





Heritage and Innovation

Introducing the Halo Integrated

Parasound has re-imagined what a totally modern integrated amplifier should be. Guided by our 34-year reputation for making the highest quality audio for the money, we've integrated time-proven analog design and the highest quality component parts with cutting-edge digital technology. Now you can enjoy all the performance of our Halo separates in a single compact unit.

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—HiFi Choice
December 2015

www.parasound.com
In the UK: 01242 511133



PARASOUND



Also available in black





Elac BS 263

Universally respected for its high-tech drive units – especially the celebrated and distinctive JET ribbon tweeter, now in fifth-gen spec – Kiel-based Elac perhaps comes across as having a little too much *vorsprung durch technik* and not enough funk.

A response of sorts has come with a new range of optional custom lacquer finishes, but I'm inclined to think its BS 263 two-way standmount – the baby of the 'affordable high-end' 260 series (there's also a 267 floorstander) – has more raw desirability than the majority of models in its extensive range. And, like many a compact component with a premium price tag, the good feelings start with first contact.

This is a really chunky little fellow, almost dinky in height but unusually deep, the enclosures' gently curved sidewalls tapering to back panels that give the upper third to the generous circumference of flared reflex ports, beneath which are single pairs of high-quality binding posts. Reassurance that you've spent your money wisely comes when you whip off the magnetically secured grilles to reveal the jewel-like drive units. I suspect exposed is how they'll stay.

Elac has been in the speaker business for around three decades and, as well as the enduring JET tweeter, has given the audio world the omni-directional 4Pi tweeter and,

most recently, its AS-XR mid and bass drivers with their unique crystal-like cone surface geometry, a 150mm version of which appears here. The AS cones are constructed from a sandwich of aluminium and paper while the distinctive crystal pattern, as well as looking very pretty, is intended to add stiffness and so help the cone stay in shape under duress.

The fourth refinement of the JET tweeter adheres to the meticulously folded membrane structure originally inspired by Dr Oskar Heil. Essentially a ribbon folded through a series of neodymium bar magnets, its construction requires incredibly fine tolerances. The upshot is a tweeter that combines efficiency with high power handling while shifting break up to a place well out of harm's way (around 50kHz).

Sound quality

Amplification duties fall to Monitor Audio's A100 (HFC 390) claiming 50W per channel and Musical Fidelity's kW250S claiming 250W each side, with digital sources of varying resolution routed through Chord's Hugo DAC (HFC 386).

Elac has an enviable reputation for making small speakers with a big, room-filling sound. This isn't simply a case of being able to play loud and have a disproportionately deep bass, though in the broad scheme of things, the BS 263 confidently ticks both

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Elac BS 263
PRICE
£1,250
ORIGIN
Germany
TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker
WEIGHT
6.6kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
192 x 285 x 285mm
FEATURES
• 1 x JET 5 ribbon
tweeter
• 1x 150mm AS-XR
mid-bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
87.5dB/1W/1m
DISTRIBUTOR
Hi-Fi Network Ltd
TELEPHONE
01285 643088
WEBSITE
elac.com;
hifi-network.com
REVIEWED
HFC 401

these boxes, even with the modestly muscular MA amp doing its bidding. More than this, though, is the sense of space the speaker is capable of generating, not just exceeding the boundaries of its bijou cabinet but also the walls of my modestly sized listening room. And it isn't just a width thing. Soundscapes are truly three-dimensional and the speaker magically dissolves into them.

All right, so much for the expansive sonic arena, what about the music? With the proviso that some allowance has to be made for scale and dynamics – a tiddler, however talented, is never going to match my reference ATC SMC20 in this respect – it is exceedingly clear, precise, well balanced and coherent. In one respect, it leaves the ATC for dead. The SMC20 is no slouch for a big, three-way floorstander, but the Elac is fast. Fast like an Ariel Atom is fast. Its temporal surety isn't manifested as leading-edge emphasis, but a rare sense of fluidity – a great complement to the similarly gifted Hugo in this respect – that lets the music breathe and move along in a completely natural and unforced manner. This transparency and insight, especially the finely resolved texture and shape of treble energy, hits all the right hi-fi notes, but the seemingly effortless lucidity is what draws you in and keeps fatigue at bay, however long you keep listening. If you want to know just how much love and care has gone into the production of James Taylor's album, *Before This World* (HFC 399) the BS 263 will provide the answer. More importantly, you'll hear why JT cares in his voice.

It wouldn't be unreasonable for anyone with £1,250 to spend to expect something that at least comes up to their waist, and there are plenty of fine floorstanders at this price to choose from. Not to sample the delights of a standmount as special as this, however, would be crazy. **DV**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
EASE OF DRIVE
★★★★★
OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Fast, transparent yet beguilingly natural sound; fine build; high-quality finish
DISLIKE: Lacks the dynamic reach of a good £1k floorstander
WE SAY: One of the best standmounts we've heard at this price point



Turntables
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Clearaudio Concept





KEF R300

One of the latest in a long line of mid-priced KEF standmounts, the R300 is pretty and technically interesting, being a relatively rare three-way loudspeaker. It's also fairly large for a standmount and looks the part with clean uncluttered lines that give it an air of sophistication, helped in no small degree by the excellent finish (which comes in a choice of classic piano black, rosewood or walnut wood veneer).

It sports the latest version of KEF's Uni-Q driver array which takes care of treble and midrange duties, and a 165mm bass driver, effectively making it a three-way design. The 25mm vented aluminium dome tweeter sits mounted in the centre of the 125mm braced magnesium/aluminium midrange cone, and a 165mm bass unit made of the same material handles the lows. Crossover frequencies are 500Hz and 2.8kHz, which means they're not done in the 1kHz region where the ear is especially sensitive – a key advantage of three-way designs. The cabinet sports constrained layer damping to lessen vibration. On the back there's a reflex port and a terminal board with built-in, selectable bi-wiring links.

Sound quality

One of the finest sounding speakers around, this has much of what the best of the rest offer, and sometimes more. I'm first struck by the maturity of the sound; it has a smooth and

extended treble, a clean and detailed midband and deep, extended bass – and it all integrates smoothly. The sub-bass on Transglobal Underground's *Temple Head* shows this speaker going lower and with more poise than any other; it's more like listening to a floorstander. There's no 'thrummy' peak up into the lower midband to give the illusion of more bass – it is even and well proportioned. Further up the frequency band, there's a sense that the instruments can play more independently of one another than most rival offerings. It's fascinating listening to the decay of the snare drum on Made In England's *All Our Dreams*, which seems to hang in the air far longer than most of the rivals pitched against it in our *Group Test*.

The RS300 is very clean and detailed too, and manages to be a highly captivating listen. It's very good in hi-fi terms yet lots of fun to hear. It doesn't quite have the terrier-like energy of the £900 Tannoy Precision 6.1 (HFC 397), but this makes it far less music-sensitive than most. For example, John Patton's *Ding Dong* has a powerful groove as well as a delicate cymbal sound and super-clean snare drum. It's as if the KEF is able to sift through the muddle in the mix and take you direct to the instrument. Ryuichi Sakamoto's *The Last Emperor* soundtrack shows excellent soundstaging too, but it gives a fuller range with greater detail and depth. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
KEF R300

PRICE
£1,000

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
3-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
12kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
210 x 385 x 345mm

FEATURES
• Uni-Q driver: 1x
25mm tweeter;
1x 125mm mid
• 1x 165mm bass
• Quoted sensitivity:
88dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
GP Acoustics (UK)
Ltd

TELEPHONE
01622 672261

WEBSITE
kef.com/gb

REVIEWED
HFC 397



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Powerful and detailed yet smooth and sophisticated sound

DISLIKE: Lacks a little in the way of high-frequency delicacy

WE SAY: Superb all rounder that delivers excellent value

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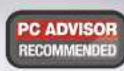
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MunroSonic EGG100

As near-field monitors fed by a dedicated 30W per channel amp, it's no good expecting the EGG100s to fill a large lounge with window-rattling decibels. They are designed to go loud and the deliberately under-rated amp (not shown) has plenty of headroom. You can place them on your desktop or if you've got a mixing desk. Writing desk? Maybe a little too near-field. No, if the EGGs are to be used in a hi-fi context, sitting 6 to 8ft back is right. Second system duties in a smallish room is a comfortable fit.

There's just the one line-level input and it's balanced so you'll need a pair of XLR interconnects and a source with a balanced output. Standard pro fare, of course, as are the speaker cables with their insert-rotate-and-click Speakon connectors (supplied). The headphone output on the right side of the half-width control unit's sparsely featured fascia is driven by its own Class A amp with claimed un-measurably low distortion.

Another pro nicety is the tweakable high and low-frequency response at 10kHz and 63Hz respectively for each speaker, adjusted with a small screwdriver. Also, the EGGs are handed left and right, not because of any driver offsets, but because the

speakers and amps are individually matched at the factory.

Sound quality

For a little maybe-too-ambitious competition I start off listening to Elac's BS 263 (page 61) hooked up to a Roksan Caspian M2 integrated with Townshend F1 Fractal interconnects and Isolda speaker cable. That's an amp/speaker combo of comfortably over £4k, so the EGG system will be doing well to live with that. It sets a dazzling standard that doesn't just seem brilliantly uncoloured, fast and transparent, but has weighty and extended bass for its size, too.

In this latter respect, team Elac/Roksan wipes the floor with the EGGs, lending lower frequencies a physical heft that's missing from the diminutive ovoid transducers. Despite their impressively supple, taut and tuneful bottom end, there's only so much 100mm drivers can do, however cleverly tuned and aligned their reflex ports. That foundational bass simply isn't there so, yes, a dedicated subwoofer will be a welcome adjunct to the system.

Having said that, what happens from about 70Hz up is extraordinary. The word 'clarity' is overused in hi-fi circles, but I'll make no apologies

here. As you'd expect, given their purpose and pedigree, these speakers and control unit amps do the '...as a mountain stream' thing to a degree that owners of electrostatics or fine headphones will find remarkable. What's really remarkable, though, is the way they confound the common perception that near-field studio monitors are uncaring detail freaks that mercilessly tear music apart for forensic inspection, the better to manipulate and organise a mix. That may be true of some studio kit we've listened to, but the EGGs really do seem to step outside the box.

Sublime rendering of timbral texture and colour and a stunningly low noise floor that allows notes and ambient reverberation to decay into inky blackness are the first things you notice and seem impossibly 'high-end' given the modest price of the system. Scale and depth that swamps the actual positioning of the speakers also has me blinking in disbelief and yet, within that expansive soundstage, imaging is rock solid and in proportion, Joe Sample's piano, for instance, having a beautifully contained acoustic presence on stage for Al Jarreau's live *Tenderness* album rather than an elastic keyboard that leaks out across the loudspeakers.

No, the EGGs aren't kind to poor recordings. But you can hear exactly why they're poor and if you're mesmerised, as I am, by the sheer transparency and resolution on offer, it might even make you smile.

For the most part, the EGGs are a dream to listen to simply because the bass limitations aren't too obvious and they present so much of the music in such an unsullied, spatially convincing, believable and coherent form – you're unlikely to hear better focus, speed and timing – that you don't have to compensate for those parts you 'nearly' hear. As a result, the experience seems more complete and satisfying than usual. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
MunroSonic
EGG100

PRICE
£1,299

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way near field
monitor with control
unit/headphone
amplifier

WEIGHT
Speaker: 3kg each
Amp: 5.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
Speaker: 240 x 300
x 230mm
Amp: 390 x 180 x
310mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm soft
dome tweeter
• 1x 100mm
bass driver
• Control unit/amp
quoted power
output: 2x 30W

DISTRIBUTOR
MunroSonic

TELEPHONE
0845 5002500

WEBSITE
munrosonic.com

REVIEWED
HFC 403

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Clarity;
three-dimensional
soundstage; speed
and timing

DISLIKE: Limited bass
weight and extension;
one input

WESAY: Affordable
style meets studio-
class sound



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Q Acoustics 3020

AS A BRAND, Q Acoustics isn't as old as some, but its pedigree in the affordable arena makes it the one to beat. The new 3000 series makes improvements over its 2000 series in cabinet construction, driver design – specifically the tweeter – and in overall aesthetics. The only downside is the curious positioning of the terminals that makes connecting plugs harder than it should be.

The look of love

The driver complement is a 125mm paper bass/mid and 25mm soft dome tweeter. A single rear port augments the bass response. The 3020 is comfortably on the small side of the standmount spectrum. Fit and finish are extremely good and details like the curved corners on the cabinet and the magnetic grille fastenings make it look clean and modern. Graphite and walnut finishes are available at £190, with leather and gloss commanding a further £60 premium.



DETAILS

PRICE
£190

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 402

OUR VERDICT



Sonically, the 3020 manages to balance accuracy and entertainment with aplomb. The handling of voices and instruments is quite excellent and entirely believable especially with Regina Spekter's pared-back vocals and piano on *Consequence Of Sound* sounding excellent, displaying a wonderful sense of the space it was originally recorded in. With more uptempo tracks, it is fast, cohesive and extremely engaging.

The most surprising aspect of the performance is the bass, which sounds a lot deeper than the quoted 64Hz frequency roll off would suggest. There is plenty of low-end shove with an impressive amount of detail and texture to it that integrates well with the upper frequencies. Add in the assured soundstaging and refinement, and you have a very fine speaker that punches well above its weight. **ES**

Quad S-1

QUAD'S S SERIES, brings a bespoke ribbon to a market sector where domes have traditionally been the norm. It's a bold initiative to capture a flavour of that airy and finely-textured ESL transparency for those of us with more frugally tailored pockets. The S-1 is small enough to squeak into the 'cute' category, measuring 285mm high and its ribbon tweeter is partnered by a 100mm Kevlar-coned bass/mid driver.

Sound quality

The S-1 draws the listener right in from the opening bars and doesn't let go. Perhaps pertinently for Quad, the overarching 'politeness' that has tended to define the sonic signature of some previous small standmount designs from the company, has given way to a higher order of dynamic expression and immediacy and, more rewardingly still, an ability to deliver lightning-fast transients without blunting or, indeed, hyping

the leading edge. The ribbon tweeter is clearly key to this as it breathes hitherto unprecedented life, structure and resolution into recordings that might previously have been considered less than sparkling examples of the digital art.

Eric Clapton's *August* album is a classic test here. It can often sound muddy, harsh and congested, but the S-1's openness and ability to render subtle ambient cues believably enables it to mine subtleties and nuances that make it a much more enjoyable listen. Bass is agile, tuneful and articulate but remarkably weighty and extended considering the bijou box and main driver.

With Audio Analogue's Crescendo (HFC 396) amp in situ and single-wired, the balance becomes more relaxed but the presentation remains outstandingly transparent, natural and unforced with an immersive but tightly focused soundstage that has a real sense of depth as well as



spreading comfortably beyond the lateral span of the speakers.

Anyone with preconceived ideas about the 'house sound' of Quad's more affordable loudspeakers really should arrange an audition. Yes it's refined and smooth, but it combines this with new levels of transparency, dynamic expression, musical insight and maturity. A very classy little number, then, and great value for money to boot. **DV**

DETAILS

PRICE
£500

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEBSITE
quad-hifi.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 404

OUR VERDICT

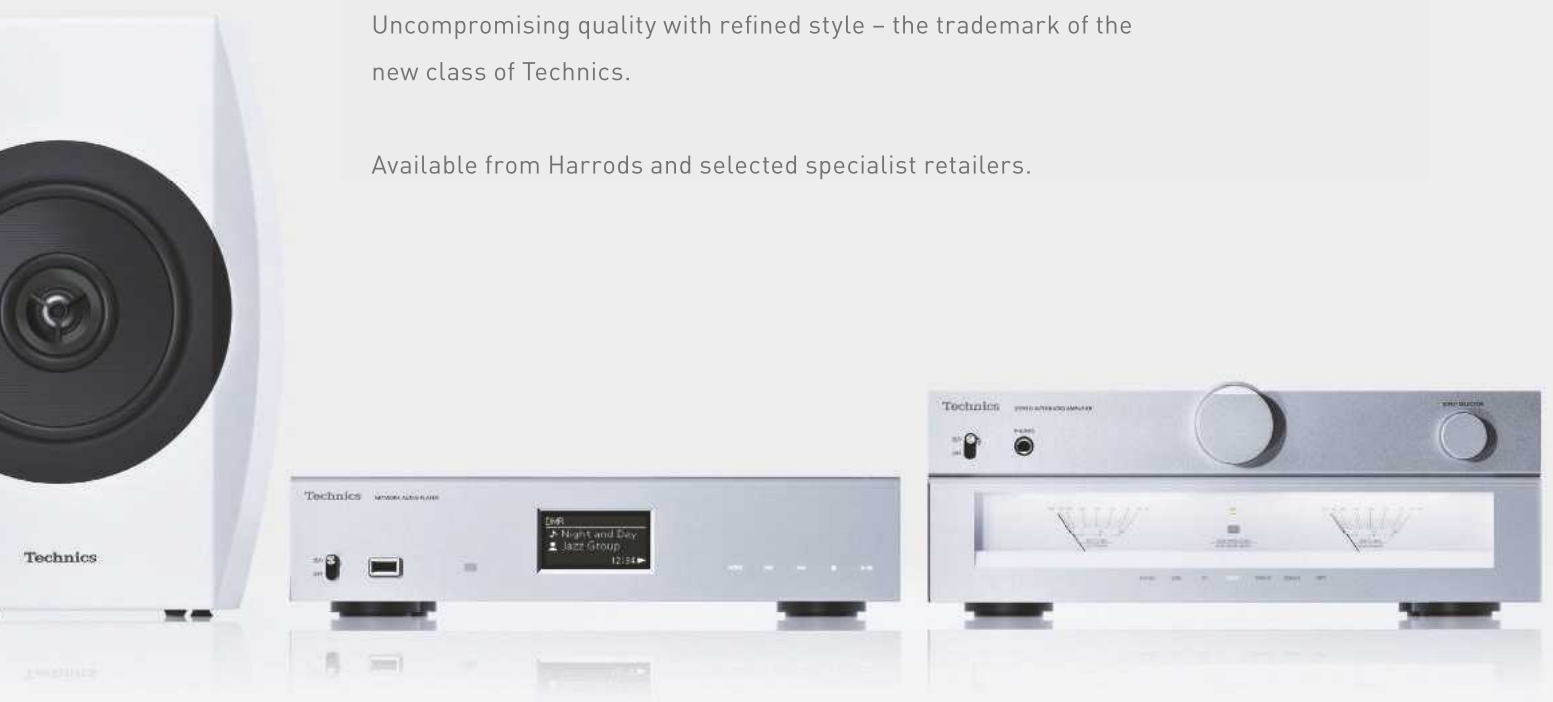


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Sonus faber Chameleon B

These speakers are customisable, with a choice of different coloured side panels to suit taste and/or decor, which are easily removed or interchanged. There are six different finishes available, including white, black, metal blue, metal grey, orange and red; one pair (in the colour of your choice is supplied as standard and additional sets cost £145).

The B version tested here is a two-way reflex ported standmount with a custom-designed, 29mm doped fabric dome tweeter and a 150mm mid/bass unit with a polypropylene cone and free compression basket. Electrically, it is of average sensitivity; 87dB is claimed and this means you need around 50W RMS of power for it to really make an impression in a normal-sized room. Nominal impedance is quoted at 4ohm, and Sonus faber says its power handling is 150W. Being reflex ported it shouldn't be rammed right against a boundary wall, but I find it works well fairly close at 25cm or so away. There's also an attractive optional stand, which sits the speaker at an ideal 70cm high – although I discover it sounds good on my less exotic looking Atacamas. I use an Exposure 3010S2-D amplifier (page 105) and

Chord 2Qute DAC (page 55) with a variety of digital sources, and the speakers really begin to sing when run for a few hours, and are very slightly toed-in towards the listener in my largish listening room.

Sound quality

On a superficial level, the Chameleon B is a good deal livelier and more animated sounding than traditional Sonus fabers, yet it does retain the clarity and smoothness for which the brand has become famous. You get a punchy, engaging and enjoyable sound, yet it doesn't sound as opaque and unsuited as one might expect for a pair of what are – by this company's standards – budget boxes.

Kicking off with Coldplay's *A Sky Full Of Stars*, the recorded acoustic is expansive, the soundstage pushes back surprisingly far in the room and the speaker captures the epic, stadium rock feel of the production. Vocals are smooth, showing no sense of brittleness, and the keyboard has a fulsome, rich, quality. Hi-hat cymbals, are crisp and clear and the steel string guitars strummed in an enjoyably percussive way.

Give it something a little more challenging, and things stay fun. *Dance On A Volcano* by Genesis is a typically dry, mid-seventies rock

track that's very well recorded but slightly impenetrable. The Sonus faber picks its way through, with a gutsy, propulsive rendition. Bass is, of course, ultimately limited on a speaker that's as compact as this one is, and as you'd expect it's missing the bottom octave, although above this it sounds confident and tuneful if it's not asked to do too much physical exertion at high listening levels. Its light, breezy character goes up into a wide, spacious midband that's detailed and very good at conveying timing and dynamic nuances.

In absolute terms, this loudspeaker is a little congested in the midband. Kate Bush's *Snowflake* signposts this, but it's certainly no worse than any of its similarly priced rivals. When the volume goes north, you also begin to be aware of its physical limitations. When playing something like this track, with its powerful, close-miked piano cadences the Sonus faber starts to compress things and begins to falter. Again, it's no surprise for a box of its size and price, but suggests that it's best in smaller-to-medium-sized rooms and wouldn't be a first choice for blaring parties all night.

Locate this speaker in a sensibly proportioned room with a good solid-state amplifier and a decent source and it works a treat. It has the ability to make any music that you play through it fun, yet it doesn't descend into crudeness or hardness at any point and so won't have you hiding behind your sofa.

Even when designing relatively cheap and small loudspeakers, the Italians seem able to do it with a flair that eludes so many manufacturers from other countries. The Chameleon B faces stiff competition from several highly capable price rivals, but in the end it just oozes charm and character that makes living with it so much fun. This doesn't just go for the sound either; because the style, construction and even the packaging is superb. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sonus faber
Chameleon B

PRICE
£700

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
185 x 315 x 283mm

FEATURES
• 29mm fabric
dome tweeter
• 150mm
polypropylene
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
87dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds
Ltd

TELEPHONE
0208 9713909

WEBSITE
absolutesounds.
com

REVIEWED
HFC 402

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Big-hearted music maker with brio and warmth

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: A little congested across the midband

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: Beautifully packaged, stylish speaker with a super sound

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

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HI-FI Choice, June 2015



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HI-FI Choice, January 2015



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STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER



Tannoy Revolution XT 6

The Dual Concentric driver has given Tannoy its distinctive sound over the years, and does some things better than conventional loudspeakers. By keeping the tweeter and the midrange (and usually bass) units together on the same plane, it makes for a far more phase-coherent sound, which gives soundstaging and pin-point image location. The recent revamp of the Dual Concentric is said to be, “a major milestone in more than 65 years of the company’s audio research and development”, no less.

The concentric mid/bass and treble drivers now share the same magnet, and a special waveguide integrating a donut-shaped tweeter diaphragm and bullet-shaped phase plug. Tannoy has moved the tweeter forward for better time alignment, which is said to improve high-frequency directivity and low-frequency performance, enabling a higher crossover point.

Sound quality

The Kinks’ *Village Green Preservation Society* is a jaunty, melodic slice of late sixties rock, and the Tannoy captures it perfectly. Bouncy, fun and tuneful, it doesn’t attempt to get right down into the mix and throw out the finest forensic details, instead preferring to

give a rousing and musical rendition. There are speakers at 10 times the price that get bogged down trying to tell you how rudimentary the recording is, and end up sounding far less enjoyable in the process.

This little speaker has a pleasingly fulsome bass that provides a subtle push to basslines on rock, pop and soul. It doesn’t go down as low as the XT 6F (page 89), yet on first listen sounds almost as commanding. The 6F is obviously more even and initially less ‘impressive’, whereas its smaller brother certainly makes an entrance. This warmth extends all the way up; this isn’t one of those speakers that etches the sound on your cranium with a laser beam. The midband is smooth and expansive, the Tannoy is exceptionally good at projecting sound out into the room and this contributes to its friendly nature. The soundstage hangs in the room with the speakers dissolving away into the ether. Images project into space with total ease, and the smoothness of the midband makes this all the more enjoyable.

Coldplay’s *Speed Of Sound* showcases this fantastic midband perfectly. It’s a big, stadium rock-style belter and the Tannoy duly delivers a cathedral-like recorded acoustic, almost as if you’d

pressed the ‘stereo wide’ button on an eighties radio cassette portable. As well as those big, bold stereo images, the XT 6 goes straight for the melodic content of the music, throwing out those big crashing keyboards and intricate guitar noodling. It also carries the lead vocal very well, sounding ethereal and located positively within the mix. The midband blends seamlessly with the treble, so you never get the impression you’re listening to two separate drive units. The dome tweeter, inset into the mid/bass driver, gives a crisp sound with decent detailing.

It is only when you feed it some slightly more dense, impenetrable programme material that it begins to show its mortality. 808 State’s *Pacific 707* is not especially well recorded and can sound muddy through all but the very best speakers and here we begin to observe that the Tannoy isn’t quite perfect. It remains great fun to listen to, being bouncy and involving with excellent rhythms and a pleasingly warm tonality. However, the XT 6 doesn’t pick through the mix quite as well as it should, sounding slightly congested. The mid/bass cone has a subtle but distinct coloration and it seems to take away some transparency. All speakers suffer this in one way or another, of course, especially at this price.

The first movement of Beethoven’s *5th Symphony* again shows the superb soundstaging, although the massed strings don’t quite have the lustre that some rivals bring. However, its ability to carry the spirit and emotion of the music is second to none – it makes this beautiful classical work all the more engaging and compelling. It’s a dramatic-sounding first movement, but this loudspeaker actually seems to heighten the epic feel still further. Partnered with a powerful amp like the Exposure 3010S2-D (page 105), the size and power of the sound is totally unexpected given the price. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Tannoy Revolution XT 6

PRICE
£600

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2-way standmount loudspeaker

WEIGHT
7.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
221 x 400 x 302mm

FEATURES
• 1x 150mm Dual Concentric driver with 25mm tweeter
• Quoted sensitivity: 89dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Tannoy Ltd

TELEPHONE
01236 420199

WEBSITE
tannoy.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 403

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Widescreen soundstage; sheer musicality

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Midband not as transparent as some

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

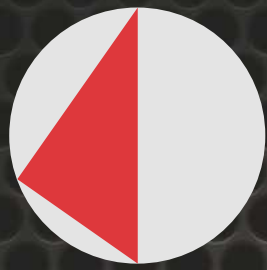
WESAY: A charming speaker that’s full of fun

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



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XTZ Master M2

From the wine-gum shape of the baffle to the curvy, super-dense construction of the enclosure and implementation of the top-drawer drive units, this speaker's ambition bears little relation to its price.

Departures from the ordinary start with the enclosure, which is made from a weighty composite comprising epoxy, polyurethane, potassium carbonate and 'organic bubbles', resulting in a material that, according to XTZ, is 40 percent more dense than MDF. The 165mm-diameter bass/midrange driver is a SEAS unit further developed by XTZ and SEAS that employs a new woven polypropylene 'Curv' cone claimed to be the world's first self-reinforced 100 percent polypropylene composite. The partnering tweeter is a generously sized 30mm soft dome unit with dual neodymium magnets to boost efficiency and power handling. The rear-firing port comes with a sleeve-style neoprene sock that reduces the size of the aperture (but improves bass extension) and a foam bung for quasi-infinite baffle operation.

Sound quality

I eventually settle on a Roksan Caspian M2 CD/integrated front end with the 'max bass extension' port socks in situ and the speakers' deep, tapered bases secured to my stands. I say eventually, because I spend

several days snared by the M2's almost spooky ability to lay bare with consistency and clarity the differences in sonic character of any kit I place upstream from it. Not just electronics and wires, but support platforms, mains blocks and even the brand of CD-R used to make duplicate rips.

This kind of forensic transparency isn't always a good thing, but it is an essential part of the high-end remit that generates degrees of separation from brighter, blunter mainstream boxes. It's also where things can start to go wrong. Well-designed budget speakers often impress because they focus on the musical fundamentals and can carry a tune. High-end sensibilities require more. In addition to marrying musical communication with the kind of resolution and bandwidth that can precisely recreate any recording acoustic in three dimensions there has to be the dynamic compass allied to a lightness of touch that engages and involves the listener. Connection is the thing. And beneath all the separate elements that contribute to a speaker's sonic signature, there is a deal to be struck between excitement and refinement that has the potential to deliver more enduring listenability and satisfaction.

The M2 doesn't quite nail the high-end ideal, but comes amazingly close – astoundingly so considering its price, if with at least one caveat. Despite XTZ's 'room friendly' claims

and port tuning possibilities, the speaker can be quite fussy and needs heavy-duty stands and a good deal of experimentation with positioning and the port bungs to give of its best. In my room, it's a little dry and lifeless with the ports blocked off, a tad loose and boomy fully open. The aperture-narrowing sock works a treat. Pulled about a foot away from the rear walls and toed-in a few degrees, everything gels and serious listening begins.

The visceral thwack of Steve Gadd's drum kit on Steely Dan's re-mastered *Aja* CD immediately hints at the speaker's startling bass power and reach, perfectly parlaying the Caspian M2 amp's penchant for delivering music in a tangible, coherent way with fine drive and rhythmic integrity. In fact, the speaker seems to love its Roksan namesake, sharing a nose for subtlety alongside an obvious talent for scale and impact. It seems to be a deal brokered in heaven: power with a sense of poise and control that's never found wanting.

Time and again, from Boz Scaggs to Bob Dylan, the speaker's output proves finely revealing, harmonically rich and rhythmically coherent. Treble has air and harmonic definition devoid of synthetic sparkle, the midrange a luminous, holographic presence, bass proper foundational weight and depth coupled to supple agility and control. The longer I listen, the easier it is to appreciate the range of tonal colours in the standmount's palette. It seems to help average quality recordings, but with the right material can muster quite stunning dynamic clout combined with delicious detail, clarity and finesse. There's something of the proverbial iron fist in a velvet glove about this approach, and it draws you in.

The Master M2 is a slightly imperfect, fussy high-end speaker at a bargain price. It casts its spell in the first few bars, and the more you listen the more you grow to love it. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
XTZ Master M2

PRICE
£1,400

ORIGIN
Sweden

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
18.6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
231 x 424 x 374mm

FEATURES
• 30mm dome
tweeter with
waveguide loading
• 165mm mid/
bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
88dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Epic Home Cinema

TELEPHONE
07429 370015

WEBSITE
epichomecinema.
co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 396

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Goes for the full nine yards and mostly succeeds

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Needs care and patience to get the most from it

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: Not perfect, but as close as you'll get to high-end for the money

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER

and the woofers lock straight into the infectious groove. Bass is agile and feels surprisingly deep. As the track builds, the vocals are delivered with dynamism and soar high above the electronic synthpop layers. And all this time I'm looking at small floorstanders that don't appear to be the source of the sound – a sign of excellent imaging.

To confirm the Avita's soundstage prowess, I play a lossless rip of Roger Waters' *Perfect Sense, Part 1* from *Amused To Death*. The spatial information and recording technique highlights exactly what this speaker is able to do. A clap of thunder breaks through the lazy congas and ambient cicadas and the Avita comfortably steers the deep, brooding sound up and around the ceiling of my room. The tone of the piano motif and Waters' close-miked vocals are sumptuous and crisp in equal measure and fixed in three dimensions. PP Arnold's exceptional vocals then press forward; the Avita conveying her passionate performance brilliantly with revealing, airy, sweet detail from the panel seamlessly integrated with the bass driver. Spellbinding.

The Avita is a quality speaker that clearly inherits many trickle-down engineering solutions from higher up the Cadence range. It blends unique technology choices in ways that combine to create a rare mix of wide and deep imaging with fast and natural tonal delivery, especially around voices and acoustic instruments. The beautifully finished electrostatic panel is the star performer and an easy load. Some may feel they want more pronounced treble, but an audition should win anyone over. Hybrid electrostatics have long been considered a tricky holy grail by audio designers and Cadence shows impressive mastery in the modestly priced and elegantly finished Avita. **CW**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Epic imaging; wide sweet spot from cute panel; build

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WESAY: Unique design that blends refined engineering to create a magical, sweet soundstage with an agile performance

★★★★★



Cadence Avita

Based in Pune, India, Cadence Audio celebrated its 25th anniversary by announcing that some of its most celebrated products would be available in the UK. Leading the way are the Avita speakers, considered one of the entry-level products in its hybrid electrostatic range.

The diminutive mid/tweeter electrostatic panel is a thing of engineering beauty, while the 7in Kevlar/Nomex bass unit is housed in a gently reclining chamfered front port. Meanwhile, the polished, perforated face is home to an extremely durable but thin (5 micron) indium tin oxide-coated PTFE membrane responsible for the vast majority of the frequency response.

The Cadence speakers seem very tolerant of positioning and I find only a little toe-in is required. Even while setting up, it is apparent that the curved electrostatic panel significantly widens the expected sweet spot, with the degree of on and off-axis listening

being far less important than many electrostatic panels. Given the modest height, the panels do need careful spike adjustment to aim the strongest treble energy towards ear level.

Sound quality

Spinning Neil Young's remastered *Old Man* on HDCD, I am impressed by just how believably the Avita recreates the intimacy of the performance and the deep acoustic of the venue. The power of Young's voice and the dexterity of his guitar fingerpicking are fixed in space in a way that you just see vividly. Speaker reviews often describe a floating image, but this image doesn't float it snaps into sharp focus and unfolds beyond dimensions that such a small speaker has no real right to deliver.

Playing a lossless rip of *Seasons (Waiting On You)* by Future Islands presents a more challenging track. Opening synths and tambourines are beautifully lit in deep, dark space by the smooth but sparkling panel treble,

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cadence Avita

PRICE
£2,280

ORIGIN
India

TYPE
2-way hybrid
electrostatic
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
35kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
240 x 950 x 280mm

FEATURES
• Electrostatic
mid/tweeter
• 7in Kevlar/Nomex
cone bass unit
• Quoted sensitivity:
86dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Audio Lounge

TELEPHONE
0207 4874080

WEBSITE
audiolounge.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 396

"In short, this is a good value and great-sounding cable"

Chord Clearway speaker cable
Hi-Fi Choice Dec 2015

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modern music in its stride"*

Chord C-line interconnect
Hi-Fi Choice Nov 2015



FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



DALI Rubicon 6

There's a point on the size versus price axis where the usual hi-fi considerations simply fade away. By this I mean that you begin to relax while listening and the need, however subliminal, to make allowances for the volume of the enclosure, the number of drive units and the success or otherwise of their integration lets go and an immersive sense of realism takes over. DALI's Rubicon 6 is the kind of loudspeaker that should be able to pull this trick off, a realistic point of entry to an experience where the power of the music, rather than the limitations of the transducer, commands your attention.

The Rubicon's two 165mm wood pulp cone main drivers split low and mid duties, the lower unit operates full range and the other handles the midrange, while the 29mm fabric dome tweeter hands over to a 17 x 25mm ribbon supertweeter at 14kHz. Thankfully, it doesn't require much effort to 'walk' the Rubicons into

position – it's advisable to leave at least a foot of space to a back wall and as much again to the sides – whereupon, if you want optimum stability and a solid coupling to the floor, you can attach the spiked outriggers that come bundled.

Befitting its price, size and sonic ambition, the Rubicon 6 stands in for my regular ATC SCM40 (HFC 389) reference speakers and enjoys the front-end services of a Roksan Caspian M2 CD player, Chord Hugo DAC (HFC 386), with amplification provided by a Roksan Caspian M2 integrated amp, both by itself and with a Caspian M2 power amp in a bi-amped configuration.

Sound quality

The big, heavy ATC is not an easy act to follow, because it is so truthful to the source material. It tells it like it is. Sparkling excellence shines through just as clearly as murky mess. Wisely, the Rubicon doesn't try to compete on these terms. It goes its own way and if

that doesn't meet with studio-certified levels of tonal neutrality, it's still highly enjoyable and musically satisfying.

Soundscapes are well proportioned, musicians, singers and instruments exist in three dimensions and there's a generosity to the presentation that's immediately beguiling. Strong on detail, focus and intelligibility, the DALI sounds wonderfully integrated with a spry, open, unfettered quality that makes it easy to listen to without being in any way 'easy listening'. It has that crucial believability in spades with a beautifully expressive and lucid midband underpinned by a seriously deep and powerful bass that never forgets to be agile and tuneful.

The doubled-up tweeter complement seems to do wonders for the upper frequencies which are clean, extended, free from grain and gloriously textured. But where it really excels is with tempo and rhythm. It tracks the deftest shifts in timing with the greatest of ease without ever sounding unnaturally sharp or punchy. Rock – I'm thinking of Led Zeppelin's *Kashmir* – thunders out with satisfying energy and drive, sounding properly massive and unstoppable. At the other end of the musical spectrum, intimate acoustic ensembles are treated with appropriate delicacy, if a little more tingle factor than you'd get with the ATC. Whether that's strictly correct is a moot point. Probably not, but it doesn't seem to matter.

All right, the Rubicon 6 isn't what you'd call a monitor-class design. For those seeking tonal neutrality it comes across as being a little too well lit, so it's probably not a good idea to team these speakers with electronics that sound leaner and brighter than the rich and beefy Roksans. That said, the tall, handsome DALI is a musical communicator of the first order bringing speed, timing, bass, brio and, perhaps most impressively of all, a believable sense of scale and dynamics to the party. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
DALI Rubicon 6

PRICE
£3,000

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
3-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
20kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 990 x 380mm

FEATURES
• Ribbon
supertweeter
• 29mm fabric
dome tweeter
• 2x 165mm wood
fibre coned bass/
mid drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
88.5dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
DALI UK

TELEPHONE
0845 6443537

WEBSITE
dali-uk.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 399

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Fast, open, articulate sound with great timing; cuts to the musical chase

DISLIKE: Won't sound its best with lean or bright electronics

WE SAY: Reproduces music with believable scale, pace, dynamics and a sense of joy



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Stockton-on-Tees: 0845 6019390

Peak Hi-Fi

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Tiverton, Devon: 01884 243584

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Cardiff, Wales: 02920 228565

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Doug Brady Hi-Fi

Warrington, Cheshire: 01925 828009

Inspire Hi-Fi

Chesterfield, Derbys: 01246 472222

Rayleigh Hi-Fi

Rayleigh, Essex: 01268 779762

The Listening Suite

Dublin, ROI: +35316750974

Vickers Hi-Fi

York, Yorks: 01904 691600

Audio Lounge

London, W1: 0207 4874080

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Cheltenham, Glos: 01242 583960

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London, W1: 0207 4868262

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Nr. Bishops Stortford: 01279 454860

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Zouch Audio

Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Leics: 01530 414128

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER

overhang, revealing real detail in the leading edges of driving bass notes. Hand chimes ring cleanly and float precisely in a tall, deep soundstage. Imaging is strong, but quite sensitive to listener position and toe-in, so placement is worth fine tuning.

The agility of these speakers and their consummate ease in reproducing a large dynamic range with fast transients is underlined by playing a hi-res download of Ariel Ramírez's *Misa Criolla – Kyrie*. A seismic bass drum forcibly punches the air while ringing rim shots pierce the silence, perfectly defining the large acoustic space with every tiny reverberation. A large choir gently rises from the echoes and sets out a deep, mournful melody to the mass, the LFT-8b conveying this brooding power deep in the soundstage with calm authority. Vocals soar with power, yet plaintive intimacy high over the rich layers of massed choir and death knell-like percussion. All in all, it's a spell-binding delivery of an incredibly emotional performance.

So often speakers around this price need to make decisions about what they will and won't communicate, with obvious design trade offs all too clear to hear. Here, compromises appear small. The LFT-8b can be a little 'beamy', giving its strongest imaging to a relatively narrow sweet spot and imaging appears to be mostly between and behind the plane of the speakers.

Rarely do so many smart engineering elements add up to such a compelling and natural whole, and almost never for this price. While some speakers have a soft spot for rhythmic jazz or thunderous rock, orchestral scale or intimate vocals, the LFT-8b seems utterly unfazed, adept at everything.

Often, the term 'revealing' can mean harsh or analytical, but here it just feels like I'm lucky enough to be sat next to the studio engineer as he carries out the final mix down. **CW**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Transparency; dynamic speed; coherence; range; affordable price

DISLIKE: Utilitarian styling won't appeal to everyone

WE SAY: These are giant killers – highly dynamic and sublime poise at a bargain price



Eminent Technology LFT-8b

This American speaker may well be new to you, but the original was launched back in 1989, and in the intervening quarter of a century its design has remained largely unaltered. Why? It works, brilliantly.

The heavy, base houses an 8in driver that effectively acts as a highly focused subwoofer. Within the panel, the main air moving duties are performed by a highly evolved form of planar magnetic driver, which might look like an electrostatic panel, but differs through the use of powerful permanent magnets, front and back. This is tough but very light, with much of its agility coming from the aluminium 'voice grid' effectively being etched on to the surface of the film. And unlike electrostatics that commonly use a step-up transformer

to charge stator plates, this speaker design applies the musical signal directly to the voice grid on the film, just as a regular cone speaker would to a voice coil suspended in a fixed magnetic field. The highest frequencies are delivered by a ribbon driver that resides on the inner half of each panel.

Sound quality

One might predict that such highly engineered speakers would give a sterile, analytical take on music, but the opposite is true. Playing Ben Harper's *Gold To Me* on vinyl, the opening hi-hats positively fizz with high-frequency energy, but with no apparent grain. Every tiny inflection of Harper's voice comes through without a hint of dryness. The bass riff joins in with fantastic weight and infectious rhythm but absolutely no

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Eminent Technology LFT-8b

PRICE
£2,500

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
3-way hybrid linear field transducer floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
41kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
385 x 1,590 x 710mm

FEATURES
• Ribbon tweeter
• Planar magnetic panel
• 8in sealed enclosure woofer
• Quoted sensitivity: 83dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR

HiFi Hangar

TELEPHONE
01420 472316

WEBSITE
eminenttechnology.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 400

For those seeking true excellence from their audio system



Clockwise from top left: Edge, German Physiks, Clearaudio, GutWire

Acustica Applicata	DS Audio	German Physiks	Lyra
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Avalon Acoustics	ELAC	Harmonic Resolution Systems	Nottingham Analogue
Benz-Micro	Finite Elemente	Jeff Rowland Design	ProAc
Clearaudio	Furutech	Lawrence Audio	SME Limited
			Transfiguration

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



bass. Another striking aspect of the sound, in addition to the way it propagates itself all around, is the smoothness and ease across the midband. Vocals sound sweet and the chiming keyboards never grate, as can happen with some less balanced loudspeakers. Drums sound tight and propulsive and time very convincingly; the Unlimited seems able to really dig into the deepest nuances of the playing and throw fine detailing out that other speakers just trample over. The overall effect is almost like listening to a very good pair of electrostatic headphones, but writ large right across the room. This is both consummately natural and relaxing to experience, and also very different to a conventionally engineered pair of floorstanders.

Switching to some classic seventies rock in the shape of Led Zeppelin's *Kashmir*, the speakers turn in a fascinating sound. What is spectacular is the sheer size of the sound, and the accurate way that instruments are placed within the soundstage. There is very little sense that music is coming from the Unlimited at all; it's just there like a part of the furniture, and when you put some music on the room comes to life. The coruscating drum sound is a joy – so fast, so cutting, so natural – and this works in perfect time with that epic guitar riff for which the song is famous. Robert Plant's voice can sound a little nasal through some speakers, but this one is open enough to capture the nuances of his singing. The German Physiks holds things together really well, sounding like an open window on the original recording; not quite the biggest I have ever heard, but still wide enough ajar to peer through properly.

The only obvious compromise is the bass, which although tuneful and propulsive just isn't as physically strong as rivals at the price. This, of course, is for the prospective purchaser to take a view on – it is so obviously able in many ways that most speakers are not, that many won't mind one jot. **DP**

German Physiks Unlimited Ultimate

With its omnidirectional speaker design (where the sound fires all around) using a special, bespoke Dicks Dipole Driver, German Physiks has a unique take on the loudspeaker. The DDD is quite unlike anything else in production. This transducer is theoretically highly complex, and not the easiest to make, but it side-steps a whole range of problems that other drive units suffer.

The Unlimited has two drive units; in the bottom is a conventional cone woofer, and in the upper section is the DDD with a voice coil/magnet assembly and cone that is longer and narrower than a conventional cone driver. This gives a completely different set of properties to a conventional multi-drive unit moving coil speaker. The key one being dispersion; the DDD is omnidirectional and is far less prone to producing a 'sweet spot'. This means the sound propagates better and the speakers are less fussy about placement. This applies to the tone,

too; the even tonal balance is less likely to be disturbed when sited in an unusual part of the room. Speakers with conventional drivers only produce the correct tonal balance in a narrow range of positions, due to their tendency to beam at high frequencies, but not these. Also, because the DDD has a very low-moving mass, transient response is very good which gives a realistic feel to the music.

Sound quality

If you have ever wondered what an omnidirectional speaker sounds like, the answer is that it doesn't sound like anything much at all. It sounds a lot more like sound as we hear it in nature. With an omni, the sound propagates more organically, less affected by the anomalies of the listening room. I kick off with a bouncy piece of eighties pop in the shape of Scritti Politti's *The Word Girl*. The Unlimited's rendition sets a clear template for the rest of the review, showing an almost supernaturally wide recorded acoustic, and a slightly light

DETAILS

PRODUCT
German Physiks Unlimited Ultimate

PRICE
£10,900

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
Omnidirectional floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
29kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD) 240 x 1,050 x 240mm

FEATURES
• 1x carbon fibre DDD, 1x 200mm woofer
• Quoted sensitivity: 88dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
RK Audio

TELEPHONE
07812 093677

WEBSITE
german-physiks.com

REVIEWED
HFC 399

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Superlative soundstaging; speed; musicality

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Limited bass by class standards

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: Uniquely capable design, there's nothing quite like it

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

KENNERTON

AUDIO EQUIPMENT



KENNERTON MAGISTER HEADPHONES



KENNERTON ODIN HEADPHONES



KENNERTON IKIZ
IN EAR PHONES



KENNERTON EGO HEAD AMPLIFIER



FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Monitor Audio Bronze 5

Over the years and four previous generation cycles, Monitor Audio's Bronze range, while entry-level in positioning, has tended to look and sound anything but and, as such, has done the company's reputation for quality and value no harm at all. The latest Bronze seems intent on taking cutting-edge evolution to the widest audience. A slim floorstander, the Bronze 5 is destined to be a range stalwart, just like its BX5 predecessor.

Apart from the new vinyl wrap finish option, you'd be hard-pressed to tell the difference between the two with the grilles on. Nearly everything under the hood, however, is new. The most obvious change is the two 140mm C-CAM (ceramic-coated magnesium alloy) main bass/mid drivers. They've been completely re-engineered to utilise a new type of dished cone that doesn't have a centre pole-piece aperture and so uses the entire cone surface to radiate sound. Because it doesn't have a hole in it,

MA claims the cone is inherently more rigid and efficient and less prone to break-up modes when driven hard. The 25mm C-CAM gold dome tweeter has also been updated. Structural changes to the dome's geometry and drive mechanism are claimed to improve accuracy, detail and extension at the top end of the tweeter's range, while a rear venting system allows air to flow outside the tweeter's magnet assembly into a rear-loading chamber, which is said to lower distortion and improve damping.

Sound quality

From memory, the BX5 was something of a good-time speaker with a big, bold and occasionally slightly overblown presentation. Driven too hard, it could sound a little loose and gushy, but for the most part covered its tracks well, was great fun to listen to and represented fine value.

Well, you can forget a large part of that. I'm not even going to try to draw detail comparisons between old and

new because they won't make much sense, the reason being the Bronze 5 doesn't come across as an incremental evolution of the BX5. Instead, it looks and sounds as if it should cost at least £1,000. How do I know this? I have a couple of well-respected £1k floorstanders to hand and, in most respects, the Bronze 5 more than holds its own in their company.

Straight away I'm hooked by the resolution and capacity to dig deep into a recording. The inner detail it captures can sometimes seem mesmerising, especially at late evening volumes with laid back material, exhibiting the kind of poise and graceful balance that invites listening into the wee hours. Yes, refinement, clarity, oodles of couth and that lovely ability to sound simultaneously airy and tactile. Too cool for school? Not a bit of it. Whack up the volume and the impetus and impact grows just as you'd hope, but with no loss of grip and precision. It can get down and dirty, but only as down and dirty as the recording, with very little discernible contribution from the enclosures or overworked drivers. What you might expect to be the inevitable and unmistakable moment when what you're hearing hardens and is no longer comfortable to listen to never happens.

Neither does it resort to artificial midrange emphasis and treble lift to enhance presence and sparkle. The presentation is beguilingly natural and coherent with a solid, rhythmic bass, spacious soundstage and rock-solid image stability.

That such compelling clarity, grip, dynamics and enormous musical insight can be experienced from a slim box at what is a beer-budget price is a powerful statement. It reinforces the argument that, pound-for-pound, Britain makes some of the very best hi-fi speakers on the planet. And this one can comfortably take its place among them. **DV**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Monitor Audio
Bronze 5

PRICE
£549

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
11kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
165 x 850 x 248mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm C-CAM
gold dome tweeter
• 2x 140mm dished
C-CAM mid/bass
drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Monitor Audio Ltd

TELEPHONE
01268 740580

WEBSITE
monitordaudio.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 402

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

LIKE: Great style and build; sounds like a much more expensive loudspeaker

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: An exceptionally fine baby floorstander and an absolute steal at the price

OVERALL

★★★★★

HI-FI WORLD
"Amplifier of the Year"



Stereo 845pp

"King of Triodes" ST845pp 50wpch £5,995 Worlds first 845 PP integrated amplifier

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OUTSTANDING
PRODUCT

HI-FI WORLD



Stereo 60 MKIIIm

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HI-FI WORLD

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COMMENDED



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HI-FI WORLD



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"Amplifier of the Year"



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Stereo 40 2A3

Stereo 40 with 2A3 Valves 17wpch of Pure Triode heaven £1,999

hi-fi+



Stereo 20pp

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From Icon Audio*



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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Monitor Audio Gold 200

This speaker's twin RST (Rigid Surface Technology) bass drivers, and its single midrange unit, have unusual dimpled metal cones, which are said to displace standing waves better than conventional profiles. The driver's voice coil has been better damped, too. The speaker is a three-way, but runs the two 140mm bass drivers in tandem from a claimed 35Hz up to the first 400Hz crossover point, when a single 100mm driver takes over and runs all the way up to 2.6kHz. The C-CAM (Ceramic-Coated Aluminium/Magnesium) ribbon tweeter then takes care of treble duties right up to a claimed 60kHz.

Sound quality

I start listening with the port bungs in, because almost every floorstander I try sounds better this way in my room. Yet the Monitor Audio palpably does not, coming over as a little weak and anaemic. However, after a day of playing Gregory Isaacs' *Night Nurse* at

high volume, and removing the port bungs, my experience is that the metal drive units need to sink a good deal of power in order to warm up properly, whereupon they tend to transform into something sounding altogether warmer and more musical. A general rule of thumb is about one LP side, which is around 20 minutes play, before things come together.

I cue up the title track to be greeted with a most impressive sound – snappy, spacious, fast and open, I am also rather taken with the bass. While not over endowed with quantity, the Gold 200 certainly has a very refined bottom end, one that's tuneful, extended and taut, it makes this reggae classic a pleasure.

Bouncing and propulsive the bass may be, but it doesn't win prizes for size. It doesn't strike you as a burly and muscular sort of speaker, and it's possible to get a bigger and boomier bottom end from far cheaper rivals. Yet it does have a wonderfully detailed midband and treble, which

seamlessly blends in with its fairly light but well extended bass. The overall effect is really good – there's a lack of lumpiness to its response and the speaker seems to blend in easily with the room. The tonal balance is subtly tilted towards the treble then, but this is no problem at all because it is of such high quality. The tweeter is a work of art and never sears or grates; instead it throws a lot of light on the high frequencies, giving a lively and sparkling sound. The cymbals on *Night Nurse* are sweet, smooth and delicate yet have a realistic bite; by contrast some similarly priced rivals can sound splashy and coarse.

The clever thing about the Gold 200 is its consistency. It sounds 'all of a piece', like it was cut from the same cloth, so to speak. This isn't always the case, because some manufacturers fit a variety of drivers with different materials, which can be less well integrated. One great benefit is the wide range that the ribbon tweeter works over; it seamlessly sashays down into the midband unit which has a similar tonality. Its metal cone matches the ribbon really well, giving a largely invisible transition between the drivers and it's this partnership that is central to the sound. Clean and clear – almost translucent, even – its midband and treble drivers provide an open window into the recording.

As the chorus of Prefab Sprout's *Bonny* builds to a crescendo, the vocals become enmeshed in a wash of analogue synthesiser and sometimes subsumed, but the Monitor Audio remains composed and allows all the elements of the mix their place. There's an intrinsic rightness and consistency to the performance that makes even complex productions like this so listenable.

The overall quality of finish of the Gold 200 is excellent and it feels very much like the premium product that it is. Highly recommended. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Monitor Audio Gold 200

PRICE
£2,300

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
22.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
170 x 951 x 300mm

FEATURES
• 1x C-CAM ribbon tweeter
• 1x 100mm C-CAM RST midrange driver
• 2x 140mm C-CAM RST bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity: 89dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Monitor Audio Ltd

TELEPHONE
01268 740580

WEBSITE
monitormedia.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 401

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Beautiful finish; sophisticated, detailed, musical sound

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Sound lacks physical heft compared with some

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Classy, versatile and highly capable floorstander

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Q Acoustics 3050

This is not a small speaker, standing one metre tall, and weighing in at almost 18kg apiece. It's a two-way floorstander with a single 25mm soft dome tweeter and twin 165mm mid/bass units, featuring paper doped in Aramid fibre. The designers moved to this from a paper/mica mix, and it has made the cone slightly stiffer and better controlled. The crossover point is set at 2.6kHz, which is fairly conventional. The crossover follows the 'less is more' principle, using a fourth-order Linkwitz/Riley design, with new 'U' inductors and a more compact magnetic field, helping to reduce crosstalk.

Sound quality

For most of my listening I use the speaker with the supplied foam bung in its rear-mounted bass reflex port, which tightens up the timing and dials down the bass. Unlike its predecessor (the 2050i, HFC 365), it seems more relaxed about being used

close to a rear wall without the bung. As before, a slight toe-in benefits stereo imaging, snapping the soundstage into focus.

The new design adds focus, grip and insight to the 2050i's combination of smoothness, size and power. Its predecessor had a big, broad-brush stroke sound which was lots of fun, whereas the 3050 is tighter, tauter and more regimented. It doesn't quite have the former's 'valve amplifier sensibility', where everything was sumptuous and slightly opaque – instead it brings a more sharply focused and detailed character. Part of this manifests itself as more low-level information, another aspect you notice is the more precise location of instruments in the stereo soundstage. The most profound upgrade of all, however, is the improved dynamics, making this a far more engaging and musically articulate design.

Listening to Simply Red's *Holding Back The Years*, the 3050's delicacy and detail makes it much more fun to

listen to. By comparison, the 2050i seemed bland, compressed and a little leaden – while its replacement is better able to track the gentle dynamic inflections in the playing and also Mick Hucknall's phrasing. The music acquires a sense of rhythmic snap that had previously been lost, as well as better location of instruments within the mix. There is a finer sense of flow, giving a superior idea of the song having a start, middle and end.

Moving to some higher powered house music, in the shape of K-Klass' *Rhythm Is A Mystery* – a nineties club anthem with pounding bass and thumping drums. It's wonderfully incendiary stuff, but can sound a little hard and brittle on lesser speakers, or all-too-easily losing its dynamic impact. The 3050 copes impressively well, punching out lots of clean, tuneful synthesised bass and a tight, gripping snare drum sound. At really high levels it seems to compress this a little, but it is way beyond the realistic listening levels encountered in your average terraced house. You can hear the cabinets introducing a slight slurring and overhang in the bass too. Yet that's not to say the 3050 is bad in this respect.

Some of this grip comes from the new mid/bass drive unit material, I suspect. It definitely gives the 3050 a crisper and more spry sensibility, which is able to get deeper into the recording without becoming bogged down. The mid/bass units cross over smoothly to the tweeter, which is also an obvious improvement over what came before; it seems crisper and has better air and space. The track comes over really convincingly, with the various strands in the mix separated out beautifully.

Indeed, that sums up this new floorstander – it's a less superficial performer, digging down deeper into the mix and getting more of the music out than its esteemed predecessor. And that's no small feat! **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Q Acoustics 3050

PRICE
£500

ORIGIN
UK/Germany/China

TYPE
2-way floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
17.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
200 x 1,000 x
298mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm soft
dome tweeter
• 2x 165mm mid/
bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
92dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home
Electronics

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
qacoustics.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 398

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Easy musicality; detailed, focused sound; styling

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Treble lacks air compared with the best in class

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Class-leading budget floorstander that represents superb value for money

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Tannoy Revolution XT 6F

Tannoy's legendary dual concentric driver has been refined over the years and this year has seen one of its most radical redesigns. Both mid/bass and treble drivers now use a single shared magnet and a special waveguide integrating a donut-shaped tweeter diaphragm and bullet-shaped phase plug. The tweeter has been moved forward for better time alignment and the result is claimed to be better high-frequency directivity.

The Revolution XT range is the first to debut this new driver. The '6' refers to its 6in dual concentric driver, which includes the 25mm PEI dome tweeter and a 150mm multi-fibre mid/bass unit, which crossover at 1.8kHz.

Sound quality

From the off, the Revolution XT 6F impresses, but not in the sense of sounding dramatic or impactful, but rather because it doesn't. It presents itself as a 'mature' product for its price, devoid of the usual frequency

peaks and troughs that are often deliberately – or inadvertently – engineered in.

The first track on the CD player is *Spacer*, a classic piece of disco by Sheila and B Devotion. It comes over as tonally well balanced; there's no sign of lumpiness to it, although you would have to concede that the upper bass has a subtle weight that helps propel pop music along on in a most pleasing way. Treble is very good too, being clear and crisp if not quite as delicate as the very best at the price. In-between this is a pleasingly open and well integrated midband with a surprising amount of clarity, both from a loudspeaker at this price and also from a Tannoy. It's certainly a touch more well defined and seems able to give a more intricate rendition of what is actually in the recording than I've heard before from a speaker in this segment bearing this great name. The result is that *Spacer* comes over in a most enjoyable way; sounding warm, smooth, expansive

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Tannoy Revolution XT 6F

PRICED
£999

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
16.3kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
269 x 1005 x 317mm

FEATURES
• 1x 150mm dual
concentric driver
with 25mm tweeter
• 1x 150mm woofer
• Quoted sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Tannoy Ltd

TELEPHONE
01236 420199

WEBSITE
tannoy.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 400

and yet engaging. The lead vocal is sweet and expressive.

Moving to something more contemplative, and the beautiful ambient strains of The Cocteau Twins' *Lazy Calm* shows just how good the Tannoy is at imaging. It serves up a cathedral-like expanse of sound, imaging far left and right, and also hanging back nicely. This is further underlined when I move to the Ralph Vaughan Williams stirring *Symphony No.2*, only to hear the soundstage open up still further. Indeed, the Revolution XT 6F is able to show off its even tonal balance, delicate midband and obvious ability to recreate a recorded acoustic in three dimensions. I am also struck by the fine string tone; earlier entry-level Tannoy dual concentrics tended to sound a little 'cuppy', but the latest drive unit is a model of openness and neutrality by comparison.

One often finds that loudspeakers that score highly in traditional aspects of performance – bandwidth, smoothness, detail, etc. – fare less well in their ability to entertain and involve the listener. But not so with the Revolution XT 6F, which again proves highly adept at extracting the music's essential rhythm from the electrical signal it is presented with. This is a highly enjoyable design that bounces along at a high rate of knots.

In absolute terms it isn't brilliant at dynamics – it's only a medium-sized box with three drive units after all – but it is excellent at capturing those all-important subtle nuances of the music. It also does well for its size in bass extension, having a smooth and deep bottom end that doesn't sound like it's struggling too hard with lower bass notes. Overall, there is nothing I can find to mark down this speaker at the price; it's an excellent performer with a special talent all of its own.

The Revolution XT 6F performs far better than it has any right to, and it's likely to win many friends. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Excellent soundstaging; smooth tonality; fun

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Treble doesn't quite equal the best of the rest

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Talented and distinctive mid-price floorstanding speaker

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

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OVERALL



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FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER



Wharfedale Diamond 230

Back when Duran Duran was blaring from teenage bedrooms the world over, Wharfedale's most famous speaker was the Diamond. This has evolved through many incarnations and most recently has grown to include floorstanding versions when the original was barely taller than a VHS video cassette. The 230 is the third model in the latest Diamond 200 series, and the smallest of three floorstanders. The range has a number of improvements, including new cabinet construction using a sandwich of MDF and particleboard, a new lacquered baffle design, improved bass/mid drivers with larger magnets and an enhanced 'Slot-Loaded Distributed Port' for better airflow.

Sound quality

From new, the speaker takes a good few days to run in properly. This done, it proves a redoubtable design with a character in keeping with previous recent Wharfedale speakers.

This means a clean, precise and dry sound with surprising amounts of detail, and a fine sense of the music's rhythmic flow.

You would almost think Blur's *For Tomorrow* was written for these loudspeakers, such is the fun to be had. Powerful, punchy, rhythmic, bouncy and propulsive, the Diamond relishes the dynamic accents. You hear the crash of the snare drum and the strum of the steel string guitar conveyed at lightning speed, then the decay of the note and the gap before the next is struck. It is very good at carrying this, in marked contrast to many price rivals that simply slur one note into the next. Designs that fare less well with the spaces between the notes often give a fuller sound, but it is also flatter and more monotonous.

I hear the same thing on the Pet Shop Boys' *I Wouldn't Normally Do This Kind of Thing*, which is a great way to assess the speed and insight of a loudspeaker. Poor designs descend into muddle, blurring the sound so

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Wharfedale
Diamond 230

PRICE
£499

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
2.5-way
floorstanding
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
17.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
196 x 963 x 306mm

FEATURES
• 1x 25mm soft
dome tweeter
• 2x 165mm mid/
bass drivers
• Quoted sensitivity:
88dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Group Ltd

TELEPHONE
01480 447700

WEBSITE
wharfedale.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 395

much that even the electronic hi-hat cymbal loops become indistinct. But the Diamond shines – bouncing along giving a wonderfully enjoyable rendition. Pacey and punchy, it plays to its strengths and sounds in its element. Across the entire frequency range, it is surprisingly devoid of overhang. The bass proves able to start and stop deftly, and this extends up to the midband, which shows surprising clarity. Treble is crisp and detailed, lacking any appreciable smear and proves impressively smooth too.

Just as important is the ability to signpost the music's subtle dynamic inflections. This is the other side of a speaker's character, that determines its sense of music fluidity and flow. The ability to reproduce the huge crashing sound of an orchestra at full tilt is of limited use if it can't capture the gentle, nuanced accents of individual solo instruments. Again the Wharfedale does very well here, with Grant Green's *Ease Back* showing this facet in sharp relief. The Diamond 230 goes straight into the soul of the song, deftly imparting its rhythmic flow and emotional impact. What also impresses is the excellent stereo imaging; it shows itself able to accurately recreate the spatial information that defines the boundaries of the studio. Indeed, if anything it moves the recorded acoustic a little forward relative to the plane of the speakers, giving an upfront and embracing sound, taking the listener right into the action.

It is the combination of couthness, insight and musicality that makes the Diamond 230 such a strong all-round performer. Easy to drive, unfussy about the amplifier or source it's used with, well put together and finished – it's an extremely capable package. Competition is fierce with several other highly capable speakers around with different sonic characters, but I'd wager that this will come out top of many people's shopping lists. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Very clean, crisp, musical sound; accuracy and detail

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Those seeking a warm, lush sound should look elsewhere

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

WE SAY: Brilliant budget floorstander that's refined beyond its price tag

OVERALL

★★★★★



Devialet Silver Phantom

With space-age looks and futuristic tech that can be seen as well as heard, Devialet's new system is science fiction made real

While all-in-one systems come in many shapes and sizes, generally they follow a similar set of conventions with smaller scale woofers, tweeters and amps packed together under the same roof, trading levels of sonic output for greater degrees of ease of use. But as we know, following conventions isn't the Devialet way.

From the outset the distinctive Silver Phantom's egg-like case challenges preconceptions of what a hi-fi system should look like. Each one houses its own internal amp, DAC, wi-fi streamer and speakers, allowing it to fly solo as a standalone system or work alongside more Phantoms as part of a two or more channel installation through Devialet's free

Spark app and Dialog wi-fi controller (£249). There's also a dedicated remote control (£109) and Branch speaker stand (£199). At £1,690 each, the Silver Phantom's give you a full fat 3,000W internal amp in place of the standard Phantom's already substantial 750W variant.

Perhaps the most radical part of the package is the Phantom's air-moving hardware, made up of no less than four drive units, which are cleverly incorporated into its smooth skin. These include the two opposing silver domes flanking each cheek, which act as bass drivers fashioned from 0.4mm thick 5754-grade aluminium. As well as being light and rigid, this alloy is also strong, and it needs to be to withstand much higher pressures

than your average woofers. The Phantom's HBI-powered 110mm curved white midrange ring that surrounds its tweeter in a coaxial arrangement is harder to spot. Formed from the same type of alloy as the bass drivers, it's 0.1mm thinner in a bid to reduce its moving mass. While the tweeter that sits at its core is a more conventional 25.4mm aluminium dome, recessed behind a fixed metal grille. Both the tweeter and midrange ring are angled upwards at 11.5°, to give a more even sound dispersion says Devialet, especially when combined with the Phantom's sphere-like shape.

The power behind these drivers comes from more proprietary Devialet technology, which begins with its internal amp that's built around the company's firmly established ADH (Analogue Digital Hybrid) topology, which first put Devialet on the map in 2010. This approach uses analogue Class A voltage amplification working in parallel with digital Class D current dumpers, blending the benefits of a Class A sound with Class D power. For the Phantom's dedicated ADH chip, the analogue stages of each core have been miniaturised, while four channels of ADH amplification allow it to remain compact yet extremely powerful. The Phantom's chip also incorporates Devialet's Magic Wire

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Devialet Silver Phantom

PRICE
£3,629

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
Modular music system

WEIGHT
11kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
253 x 255 x 343 mm

FEATURES
• 3,000W internal ADH amplifier
• Internal DAC and wi-fi streaming up to 24-bit/192kHz
• Format support: MP3/AAC/ALAC/FLAC/WAV
• Ethernet and optical inputs
• Configurable for mono or stereo

DISTRIBUTOR
Devialet UK

WEBSITE
en.devialet.com

REVIEWED
HFC 400

typology, which links the DAC (Texas Instrument's PCM1798 24-bit/192kHz chip) to the amp while keeping noise and distortion to a minimum.

Unboxing the Phantom you immediately notice just how solid it feels, but thanks to an inset rubber base plate it is easy to site and won't budge when parked. Alongside an IEC mains inlet, inputs are limited to a single Ethernet port and digital optical socket. We've also specified a Dialog hub for our review so that we can run two Phantoms in stereo. This adds a USB-A output.

Getting the party started is largely done in the virtual domain (the Phantom's only physical control is an on/off button) and involves first connecting the Dialog to your router, before downloading the Spark app for desktop and tablet. With the speakers powered up, the app automatically finds them on your network at launch before asking you to touch them in turn to connect. You then need to identify them within a stereo or mono setup (5.1 and beyond is in the pipeline) by dragging and dropping into 'left', 'right' or 'solo' positions onscreen and watching their bass drivers flex in acknowledgement. You can control up to 24 Phantoms across identified rooms in your home.

As well as being able to stream music stored on devices in your network, Spark also integrates with services like Deezer, Qobuz and Tidal with more set for the future as well as Bluetooth wireless.

To play, drag and drop albums or songs into your central column on the desktop app, or hit the '+' icon on a handheld device. While the app is slick and intuitive, the volume slider is a tad slow to operate via desktop (a virtual dial would be much more responsive) and I'd also welcome more track info including file type, bit depth and sample rate.

Sound quality

Despite its modest size, the first thing that hits you is the surprising scale of the Phantom's sonics. The pair of speakers is able to fill my generous 3.4m x 4.5m listening space with consummate ease.

Underpinning the sonic personality is the bass, and it's fair to say that Devialet has exceeded its objective of creating a presence on a much grander scale than a box of this size should allow by some margin. Testing the waters with a 16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC of Little Dragon's *Paris* via Tidal has me checking behind the sofa to see if a subwoofer has been installed while my back is turned, such is the

unexpected depth the bass reaches. Equally impressive is the start/stop nature of the lower notes, which are controlled and without unnatural overhang. Taking this to the next level with a 24/44 ALAC of London Grammar's *Hey Now* really gets the Phantom shifting some air, with its silver cheeks beating back and forth like wings as though the unit is preparing for lift off. Placing my hand on the casework with the music in full flight, however, reveals it to be firmly rooted to its stand. And despite the drive units getting a thorough workout that can be seen as well as heard, I can't detect any vibration bleeding into the casework. During listening sessions I regularly call on this track to aid bass tuning, as its lowest octaves can serve to highlight where natural bass extension ends and unnatural boom and/or cabinet resonance begins.

The first thing that hits you is the surprising scale of the Phantom's sonics

While the Phantom won't put up much of a fight at low volumes when placed close to walls, giving it as much breathing space as possible when winding the wick up pays dividends in terms of bass integration.

Moving on to a 16/44 rip of Nick Cave's *Abattoir Blues*, the Phantom renders the hard-hitting piano notes with enough slam to take me by surprise. Each strike on the ivory keys hangs in the air with all the sinister weight Cave intended, underpinning his understated vocals, which sound dense and rich.

Despite the all-aluminium driver array – which can sound harsh when compared with soft dome tweeters and drivers made from non-metallic composites – the Phantom is smooth and free from bright edges, thus toeing it in slightly towards your listening position won't result in over-emphasised treble or sibilance. Having said that, the treble seems less sensitive compared with many speakers and I'm able to get the best out of it by firing the sound straight down the room, which opens up the soundstage without sacrificing focus.

Streaming a 16/44 ALAC rip of Björk's *Oceania*, allows her vocals and the accompanying beatbox backing to be projected around my listening space in a manner that's more akin to a top-spec omnidirectional speaker, than a traditional box design. There's

a strong sense of the music not being pushed at you from a vertical plane, instead the soundstage is more three dimensional, filling all corners of my room, which when combined with the smooth treble makes it appear less forward sounding than many, without trading clarity or imaging.

But if this suggests the Phantom possess a laid back character, the rock onslaught of Max Raptor's *England Breathes* from a 24/96 ALAC download suggests otherwise by sounding edgy and dangerous, without becoming too brash or aggressive as the volume level heads well into double figures. The music sounds raw and untamed, while at the same time my senses don't feel as though they're being pummelled into submission, making for an exciting yet fatigue-free listen. Drums have plenty of impact as they push back deep into the soundstage with a punch that's firmly articulated. Nor do the drums get lost or overwhelmed in the mix as the track becomes more congested with layers of guitars and vocals, demonstrating the Phantom can handle the pressure when the going gets tough. Even though this is the hi-res version, I've known this recording to sound a tad muddy on rival setups, especially the guitars. But here there's less blurring at the edges of each chord strike than I'm used to, and it is able to unlock the guitar's energy as it pushes each riff across the soundstage.

Conclusion

Despite the lifestyle branding, this is a genuine hi-fi proposition that's firmly rooted in high-end audio. As a complete music system fully loaded with Devialet's latest technology and wi-fi streaming, it's also exceptional value. With a sound that's open, full bodied and blessed with bass quality that pushes the boundaries of what you'd expect from a compact system, this is a revelation. **AS**

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Superb build; high-end sound with genuine bass
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Lack of analogue input
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WESAY: Cutting-edge versatile music system offering class-leading tech and features at a sensible price
FEATURES ★★★★★	
OVERALL ★★★★★	

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Qobuz



AS WELL AS being an on-demand streaming service with 30-million tracks or more, Qobuz is also an online store with a large selection of lossless and high-resolution audio available to download. The current HiFi subs options run at £20 per month or £200 for 12 months, and currently has an offer that combines streaming with reduced-cost downloads for £220 per year.

What it gives with one hand it takes with the other, though. The desktop app is normal enough, but some of the menu options are in French, and defy all efforts to change them to English.

The key feature is the availability of a 44.1kHz lossless audio stream, but the attractive and logical desktop app also has some interesting playlists and articles, too. Given that the files are bigger than the compressed ones that the majority of other streaming rivals use, the speed that they are available using a 39Mbps broadband line is no slower than its rivals. A final useful

feature is that the desktop app can select a USB source separately to Windows so that music goes to the DAC, but notifications stay on the PC.

Sound quality

Despite being stocked with lossless audio, Qobuz never truly delivers a knockout blow. There are moments of promise – when it comes to bass response it delivers both the depth and texture that the compressed rivals frequently seem to lack. *Tron: Legacy* displays impressive scale and space and sounds genuinely CD-like.

Having said that, it often sounds a little unnatural, particularly with higher frequencies and voices. Jimmy Somerville's voice in Scratch Massive's *Take Me There* doesn't sound as natural as it really should do. What is causing this slightly artificial presentation is unclear, but it hinders Qobuz from sounding decisively better than its rivals when it comes to streaming. Further listening reveals that some



material is more adversely affected than others and this seems to directly correspond to its popularity. There is the possibility that high-demand material – and *Tron: Legacy* looks as though it is played a lot – is subject to slightly more compression than less routinely requested music on quieter servers. Beck's *The Information* – an album I've not seen on any other streaming service – sounds close to a CD rip I have.

There are indicators that Qobuz is capable of a very high performance and the annual price reduction is welcome, but the lack of consistency to lossless sound and the usability of the French-biased interface means that at the moment this is not quite a foolproof replacement for CD. **ES**

DETAILS

PRICE

£20/month

TYPE

Desktop & mobile app music streaming/download service

WEBSITE

qobuz.com

REVIEWED

HFC 396

OUR VERDICT



Tidal

OWNED BY A host of musicians, Tidal is the new kid on the block. Originally founded in 2010, it has been active under the name of WIMP HiFi, but the more serious-sounding Tidal service only debuted in the UK in 2014.

It currently claims a 36-million track library available in ALAC and FLAC formats via its HiFi subs option. This is available via web app and desktop app. The latter is conventional enough and is well laid out and easy to use. There are some curious operational quirks, though. The search box is demanding with spelling and spacing and can be a little slow. Also frustrating is the large number of albums that appear with tracks that aren't available. Tidal's idea of related artists to the one you're listening to is also different to everyone else's and often comes up with unusual alternatives.

There are some big positives. Of all of the services, Tidal's content is

easily the best. The playlists are interesting and many of the articles are a worthwhile read, too.

Like Qobuz, Tidal can be output to an external DAC independently of the computer's output. The app installs in a logical way and given that the files being streamed are much larger than on compressed services, they're delivered quickly and glitch-free.

Sound quality

Consistent across all notes is a sense that the sound is fuller with better frequency response and as a result is more believably real than the competition. This most obviously manifests itself in a sense of front-to-back depth to the soundstage that allows for a more believable relationship between performers.

It also manages to be really smooth and refined, but this doesn't come at the cost of robbing the performance of the necessary excitement. The snap dynamics of the Punch Brothers' *My*



Oh My is faithfully reproduced with audibly greater bass depth than the competition, and *Tron: Legacy* is a towering wave of strings that have a believable relationship to one another. It isn't a complete clean sweep, though, Little Feat's *Rock And Roll Doctor* doesn't manage to open up a clear cut advantage over its rivals – but with the remainder of the test material, Tidal outperforms the competition.

There is consistent depth and impressive detail retrieval that manages to present a wide variety of material in a way that is generally convincing and usually either close or imperceptible to an equivalent rip. This means it can be affected by poorer recordings, but at least the presentation is as the artist presumably intended. It isn't completely perfect, but it gives the sound I expect to hear from CD – which is really the point. **ES**



DETAILS

PRICE

£20/month

TYPE

Desktop & mobile app music streaming service

WEBSITE

tidalhifi.com

REVIEWED

HFC 396

OUR VERDICT





X6 Block, What Hi-Fi Sound & Vision, Sept 2015

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Acoustic Research AR-M2

After years of apparent hibernation, Acoustic Research was rebooted as an electronics brand under the Vox corporation's new US owners in February. Though previously better known as an innovative loudspeaker designer, the AR-M2 is the company's first hi-res audio player and marks a welcome return for the 60-year-old hi-fi monicker.

The way it places instruments in the mix makes it an incredibly easy listen

First impressions are very good and in terms of spec and price the AR-M2 looks set to be pitched against Sony's NW-ZX2 (HFC 405). Its proportions mean it looks more like a smartphone than most other digital audio players (DAP) on the market, and it's a stylish and highly desirable model. The large 5in HD-IPS touch-sensitive display is easy to navigate and quick to get to grips with. Screen resolution is 720 x 1,280 pixels and it's clean and clear with responsive onscreen icons that

make it easy to find your way around the operating system. If there has to be a downside it's the positioning of the onscreen info, which often clashes with the album's artwork text when they overlap at the top of the screen.

The M2 can connect to wi-fi, which also provides access to NAS drives thanks to DLNA support. Additionally you can download apps like Spotify, Tidal and Qobuz for streaming music.

Downloading and installing the Android file transfer software to my desktop is straightforward enough and enables me to drag-and-drop hi-res music files to the AR-M2's 64GB internal storage without any real issues. Usefully, the metadata and album artwork remains intact within the transfer. A MicroSD card slot bolsters storage capacity, and is compatible with cards up to 128GB.

Sound quality

As a familiar hi-fi brand but one of the newest names in digital audio portables, the AR-M2 sets out to be the challenger to similarly priced rivals, and Acoustic Research has its work cut out when it comes to sonic performance at the price. But the challenge is certainly met head on



and the AR-M2 does an expert job with playback via its own hi-res music player app with all material across a broad range of formats and qualities. Its fair to say that DXD shows off its capabilities the best with a 24/352 file of Mozart's *Violin Concerto No.4 in D Major*, as the AR-M2 conveys the performance with plenty of texture in the strings and demonstrates a tremendous sense of the recording's acoustic space and was unsurpassed by the competition in its *Group Test*.

Switching to something a bit more rocky, and the clarity of the vocals and the way the AR-M2 places instruments across the frequency range expertly in the mix makes it an incredibly easy listen. Bass and treble details are in excellent proportion, but just in case there's a bunch of EQ adjustments should you want to fine tune the sound balance to suit your own personal preference. There's also an effective bass boost and a 3D control that attempts to widen the soundstage. **LD**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Acoustic Research
AR-M2

PRICE
£900

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
24-bit/192kHz &
DSD-capable Digital
Audio Player

WEIGHT
245g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
71 x 136 x 15mm

FEATURES
• Quoted battery
life: 9 hours
• 64GB internal
storage
• MicroSDXC slot
(128GB max)

DISTRIBUTOR
ATC Energy Tech
Corporation Ltd

TELEPHONE
07734 064360

WEBSITE
acoustic-research.
com

REVIEWED
HFC 399



Ultra-smart
styling and
solid build

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Top-notch sound with all file formats; ease of use

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Track info can clash with album artwork

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: The best-sounding hi-res audio player we've heard at the price

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



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Arcam FMJ A39

Like almost every other affordable solid-state amplifier, Arcam designs have traditionally run in conventional Class AB, which has higher efficiency than Class A, but lower distortion than Class B. The company's new generation of higher-end amplifiers, however, turns off the non-conducting transistor much more slowly than in normal designs using a mix of positive and negative feedback in the output stage. This means that it operates in near Class A up to about 20W output, to all intents and purposes loud enough for most people.

Think of it like a hybrid car in some ways. The output stage's supply rail voltages are varied according to the signal level; it uses multiple power supplies rather than just a single one, gradually bringing in the secondary supply as the dynamic load demands it. This makes for a cool-running amplifier that sounds similar to a Class A design at real-world volumes. Arcam calls it a Class G amplifier, and it's traditionally seen in pretty high-end designs because of its relative complexity and cost.

In other respects, the A39 is more traditional. It sports a good-quality toroidal power supply, acoustically damped chassis and a built-in moving magnet phono stage.

Sound quality

No sooner have I queued up Suede's *Lazy* do I realise that this is a rather special-sounding amp, and quite distinctive in its own way. In the broadest of senses, it's a typical Arcam product with quite a fulsome bass, an impressively wide soundstage that

pushes well to the left and right of the loudspeakers and a midband that is unerringly smooth. Treble seals the deal; it's beautifully sweet and delicate by £1,500 integrated amplifier standards.

Of course, Arcam has been making amplifiers in this mould for many years, but what separates this one from previous eras is its wonderfully lucid sound. The Suede track is pretty lousily recorded and heavily processed, but still the Arcam cuts right to the musical heart of the matter, serving up a wonderfully bouncy baseline that syncopates beautifully with the drummer's hi-hat and snare drum playing.

Not only is it a musical device, but it has an excellent tone too – one doesn't always follow the other. Arcams are often characterised as fairly warm sounding, but this adds sophistication and subtlety too. The song sounds sandpapery through most sub-£3,000 amplifiers, but the Arcam is able to skilfully pull out the lead vocalist and those heavily processed guitars from the mix. At the same time it has great fun with that brilliant walking bass guitar work. The result is something that is never tiring to listen to, no matter how bad the recording; as such it should suit any of the current generation of modern, stark-sounding loudspeakers.

Its scale is vast, considering its price. Feed it Daft Punk's *Get Lucky* and it is at once big, bold and powerful, presenting the music in a dynamic and gutsy way, and has great fun with Nile Rodgers' brilliant bass guitar work. Its emotional lucidity is excellent too at the price; able to carry the emotion inside the song.

DETAILS

PRICE

£1,500

ORIGIN

UK/China

TYPE

Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT

11.5kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)

433 x 100 x 425mm

FEATURES

• Quoted power:

2x 120W (8ohm)

• Inputs: 6x RCA

line; 1x MM phono;

1x 3.5mm jack

(front)

• 3.5mm

headphone output

DISTRIBUTOR

Arcam

WEBSITE

arcam.co.uk

REVIEWED

HFC 394

With *Robbery, Assault And Battery* by Genesis, it seems able to swing large amounts of power at the drop of a hat, and remains totally unflustered while doing so. Even when pushing very hard and getting serious volumes out of it, the A39 remains completely in control. It sets up a large and spacious recorded acoustic, inside which the midband bristles with detail, despite lacking the glassiness of some superficially more detailed rivals. Powerwise, you'll have to have a seriously large listening room to want higher sound pressure levels.

If there's one area where one can criticise it, it's in its handling of stereo images. It's not bad for the price, it's just it doesn't quite match the high standards set in other departments. In absolute terms images could do with being a little more precisely located and also it could push images forward better, and hang them back just a touch more. In truth, though, this feels just a little churlish, as it is very similar to what you get from Exposure's 3010S2-D, for example (page 105).

In short, the FMJ A39 possesses excellent build, facilities and styling. In other words, it's one of the company's most competitive offers ever, and well worth auditioning. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Powerful, clean, smooth, musical sound; build quality

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WESAY: Arcam's best ever mid-price integrated amplifier

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Creek

Evolution 100A

Appropriately named, the Evolution series sees Creek take small steps towards broader mass appeal in an attempt to offer its traditional values in a more modern setting. Which is to say that the new amp feels sleeker and better finished, as well as having a good deal more facilities. The overall feel is of a classy product, befitting its not inconsiderable £1,500 price tag.

One reason for this is the potential FM tuner functionality. Owners will have to buy the optional Ambit plug-in radio module (£125). It fits into the rear panel's 'Smart-Slot' and replaces line input 5. There's a plug-in DAC module called Ruby with twin 24/192-capable S/PDIF inputs, two optical ins, USB, Bluetooth and FM radio inputs (£400) and a Sequel 2 vinyl phono stage (£120) that is plugged into a dedicated connector on the preamplifier's circuit board.

Sound quality

This is one of the most powerful amplifiers I have heard at the price. It doesn't out-punch the gutsiest high-end integrations, but certainly doesn't sound like a budget product.

It's not just a bruiser, though. It's also a highly finessed performer, with a very attractive nature that doesn't draw attention to any single part of the frequency band. Tonally it is clean and open but nicely rounded. Cue up Kate Bush's *Wow*, and you're greeted with a smooth and warm sound, just as it should be. Her voice is carried beautifully, with real delicacy and

intimacy. So many solid-state amps just can't do this, losing the sense of closeness that the recording offers, as well as freezing out the emotion too.

Another way the 100A impresses is its ability to convey multiple strands in the mix. For example, spin up The Teardrop Explodes' *Treason*, and it cuts through the densely layered and highly compressed recording with ease, to reveal individual instruments playing. There's an impressive sense of the space around those instruments too; they don't seem to be packed together like sardines. It has a commendably wide soundstage that stretches well from left to right. Within this, instruments are tightly located; I'm also impressed by the power of the vocal line. Julian Cope's voice is carried in a confident yet lucid way, just as Kate Bush's is. Behind this, towards the back of the recorded acoustic, there's a good deal of subtle, low-level detailing.

Give the Creek some powerful electronic music in the shape of Kraftwerk's *Musique Non Stop* and it's in its element. This wonderfully clean recording showcases the innate transparency of the design. Although lacking the out-and-out clarity of a cost-no-object integration, it still does a very good job conveying the music in its entirety. The swinging bass transients do nothing to upset the Creek; it doesn't deflect the overall rhythmic flow one jot. I have heard lesser amplifiers get blown off course by the powerful drum work, but it keeps a grip on it all, as you'd expect

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Creek Evolution 100A
PRICE
£1,500
ORIGIN
UK/China
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
9kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 60 x 280mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x 110W (8ohm)
• Inputs: 5x RCA line; 1x balanced XLR
• Preamplifier output
DISTRIBUTOR
Creek Audio Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01442 260146
WEBSITE
creekaudio.com
REVIEWED
HFC 395

from a top integrated at this price. Rhythmically it's very good indeed, giving an authoritative sound that always seems in control. It ties this in well with its fine command of dynamics too; going loud very fast when required, and this doesn't just mean when building up to a big crescendo. It also tracks micro dynamics well, thanks to its lithe and sprightly nature. Creek solid-state amplifiers have never not sounded musical, so it's good to see that all the additional operational sophistication hasn't robbed it of its birthright.

The only real criticism you can level at it is that it always puts on a sophisticated face, even when the music doesn't quite demand it. Move over to a similarly priced, tube amp for example, and you're going to get a more louche, emotional sound. The 100A, by contrast, keeps everything so well controlled that it just can't quite undo its top button completely.

In conclusion, Creek's Evolution 100A is an extremely versatile yet highly accomplished-sounding product; factor in the good standard of build and finish, and it is hard not to recommend. It's an essential audition for those looking for a superb sub-£2,000 integrated. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Powerful, musical sound; great flexibility

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing, but competition is stiff!

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Excellent do-it-all premium integrated amp

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

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- Mono&Stereo, June 2015

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- Kurt Lassen, *Nomono* 2015



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Exposure 3010S2-D

One of the biggest challenges the fourth incarnation of Exposure's excellent amp faces is to manage any extra functionality without letting it interfere with all that was good about its predecessor. The new 'D' suffix, indicates its readiness for the optional new plug-in DAC board. This costs £375 and offers PCM at up to 24/192 resolution, plus DSD64, and comes with USB and BNC inputs between which it auto-switches. All this is possible thanks to the Wolfson WM8742 DAC chip, which is at its heart. Vinyl fans aren't forgotten; there's an optional £240 onboard phono stage, in moving magnet or moving coil flavours.

Sound quality

I kick the listening session off with Congo Ashanti's *Days Chasing Days*, which can seem a little anodyne, and the 3010S2 didn't quite capture it in its full glory. The D model proves altogether more engaging. It's a subtle sensation, but a meaningful one. There's a sense of the midband being better resolved; it seems a little less opaque and is able to drill down into the fine detail of the mix better. Because so much is going on at this level, it becomes all the more enjoyable for it. Once the amplifier has warmed through for an hour or three, you really begin to appreciate the higher resolution afforded by the new design. It doesn't sound harsher or harder in any way, yet the recorded

acoustic appears at once better lit and more vibrant. The result is a lovely, bouncy rendition of a great track; I am particularly impressed by the extra stage depth and the smoothness to the vocals. The previous S2 could sound ever so slightly 'metal plated' through the upper midband, giving a crispness to instruments that they otherwise wouldn't have it. But its successor brings detail and depth to the sound that seems to nullify this; instruments appear slightly more three dimensional and less artificial.

Move to a more upbeat piece of music in the shape of The Motors' *Forget About You*, and the Exposure picks up its skirts and runs. It is a fast-sounding design, one that seems a little more fleet of foot than its predecessor. Again, the difference is not vast, but I discern a greater sense of involvement, a feeling that it is able to start and stop fractionally faster than before. Bass guitar lines seem to flow fractionally better, giving a more fluid feel. There's a greater sense of involvement that makes the Exposure even more fun to listen to than before; indeed its predecessor begins to seem ever so slightly wooden by comparison. The thick, compressed, crowded midband that the song offers up proves no match for the 3010S2-D, which is able to scythe through it in an imperious manner. It throws out lots of detail and delivers a believable, three-dimensional recorded acoustic – something its forebear was a little less

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Exposure 3010S2-D

PRICE
£1,500

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
12kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 115 x 300mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power:
2x 110W (8ohm)
• 6x RCA line inputs
inc AV bypass
• 2x preamplifier
outputs

DISTRIBUTOR
Exposure
Electronics Ltd

TELEPHONE
01273 423877

WEBSITE
exposurehifi.com

REVIEWED
HFC 397

adept at, and also something that few amps of this price are able to do.

A key *raison d'être* of the new amplifier is, of course, that plug-in digital audio board, so Kraftwerk's *Electric Cafe* is duly fired up, only to reveal a seriously good sound from 16-bit/44kHz. The £350 digital card is certainly no match for the £9,000 dCS Debussy DAC that I normally use, but what really surprises me is just how musically enjoyable the new board is. It is bright, crisp and even with no undue harshness anywhere.

Techno Pop from the same band sounds well lit and punchy, with sledgehammer bass and sparkling highs, plus a detailed midband that catches the many instrumental strands well. This song is great for showcasing the Exposure's large reserves of power and its willingness to use them.

Exposure really does solid-state amplification very well; it crystallises everything that's good about its trademark sound down into one simple, versatile package. From a single, modestly sized box you get a fast, powerful sound that's highly involving to listen to, yet tonally smooth and neutral enough to let you listen for long periods on end. **DP**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Superbly powerful, crisp, musical sound

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Still lacks flexibility compared with rivals

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WESAY: Worthwhile update to a brilliant mid-price integrated

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Hegel H360

M eet the H360, Hegel's latest integrated amp, which replaces the outgoing H300. It quotes a similar healthy output of 250W into 8ohm and 420W into 4ohm, but with completely new power supplies and output stages claiming to enable 50 percent more current delivery. A new DAC utilises AKM chips and a new master clock to raise data handling to 24-bit/192kHz for all inputs as well as native DSD64/128 for the 'non-asynchronous' USB input. Furthermore, its patented SoundEngine technology has been revisited and is said to achieve lower distortion and a high damping factor of 4,000.

Sound quality

I warm the H360 through with the INXS track *Elegantly Wasted* on CD, feeding the amp's onboard DAC via the coaxial connection. From the opening cow bells, bass and springy guitar riff, I'm immediately struck by just how fast and ultra clean it sounds. Improvements are clear and profound. Percussion has extra punch and speed, tambourines shimmer with extra vitality, bass lines are taut and dry, but now have more incisive force and extra musicality. Hutchence's vocals are rich, yet every inflection of his voice places him in a solid three-dimensional soundstage. This track sounds simple, but trips up many amps with weaker timing or an inability to resolve detail around fast-changing transients across dense, well-recorded layers.

Connecting my Timestep T-01MC (HFC 371) phono stage to the analogue input, I spin Robert Wyatt's

Shipbuilding, which confirms that the H360 is just as strong with analogue signals. The opening expressive brushwork sets out a deep, dark and wide acoustic space from which the piano and double bass rise in unison. The forceful bass tones of both instruments are similar but distinct and I clearly hear the difference between reverberating piano and plucked bass strings. Wyatt's fragile, wistful voice is portrayed beautifully and the amplifier handles every tiny tilt and syncopation with mastery.

Playing Brian Eno's *An Ending (Ascent)* as a lossless rip via the USB input, I'm treated to a captivating performance. Huge brooding bass notes join with ultra-high harmonics to create a pulsing pattern of gently shifting sonic colours and textures. If you think ambient music is easy for an amplifier, you may be startled by what you haven't heard. Here the H360 is in complete control, layering subtle, haunting tones over richly detailed shimmering layers, with deep drones and mosquito-like highs handled with equal aplomb.

Accessing my iTunes library through the network connection, I remotely play a low-quality AAC file of Nils Lofgren's *Bass & Drum Intro* and I am truly surprised by the richness and three-dimensional definition of the soundscape. Deep bass has excellent leading-edge detail and the charged acoustic atmosphere is expertly communicated. The H360 really has no right to deliver such an impressive level of playback from such modest ingredients.

It's easy to view this product as the meeting of some pretty high-end hi-fi

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Hegel H360
PRICE
£3,400
ORIGIN
Norway
TYPE
Integrated amplifier/DAC/network music player
WEIGHT
20.5kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 150 x 430mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x 250W (8ohm)
• 1x coaxial; 3x optical; 1x USB-B; 1x Ethernet; 1x RCA; 1x home theatre; 1x XLR inputs
• Fixed and variable line-level outputs
DISTRIBUTOR
Hegel Music Systems, Oslo
TELEPHONE
00 47 22605660
WEBSITE
hegel.com
REVIEWED
HFC 401

with the convenience of a one-box lifestyle product. Attention to the preamplifier, power supplies, DAC and power output sections all seem to yield excellent new sonic results for critical listening.

The balanced analogue input is also really well executed and the quality of speaker control is excellent. On the convenience front, the H360 is very comfortable acting as a complete entertainment hub across a raft of inputs and Hegel's refinements around simple network access makes more casual listening a breeze.

Some bass addicts may find the H360 rather dry, but lower octaves are most certainly there and powerfully managed. The H360 suits speakers that only give their best from strong control and demand plenty of current to reproduce large dynamic swings, including some standmount designs that only create quality bass when muscled. If you have more sensitive speakers or an easier load, this means it will deliver the goods without breaking into a sweat.

In the H360 Hegel has created a new reference product that looks to be creating a whole new benchmark performance for others to try their best to match. Miss it at your peril. **CW**

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Ultra-clean and engaging sound with high transparency and grip; DAC integration

DISLIKE: Display shows basic info only

WE SAY: Hegel brings together its standalone component expertise in one appealing, multi-talented unit

★★★★★

Ming Da Piccolo (MC368-B902)

LOOKING AT THE Piccolo, you can't help but be surprised by the build quality. There are no sharp edges, no gaudy finishes or awkward graphics. Using two KT90 beam pentode power valves running in single-ended mode, two 12AU7 input valves and a 5U4G(274B) rectifier valve, it produces a claimed 18W of Class A sound. It also sports a headphone socket, three stereo inputs via RCA connectors, and an infra-red remote volume control.

Sound quality

In the same way that you would not buy a supercar to do the school run, this amp needs to be purchased by someone who knows the job it is intended to do – to make lovely, sweet music into a fairly sensitive pair of loudspeakers. It can handle a variety of programme material, but

with just 18W per channel it is never going to be the new king of rock.

It's a revelation, with a breathtaking beauty to Heidi Berry's dark, sultry voice on *Washington Square*. The song is moody, atmospheric and has gentle filigree detailing sparkling away at the back of the mix. The Ming Da captures it all without so much as blinking; it's like water off a duck's back. It even has you gasping at the exotic way it conveys the rich and resonant piano. On this song the bass line is gentle and doesn't tax the amplifier much, or throw it off balance. The same goes for more uptempo rock tracks like REM's *Welcome To The Occupation*. More demands are made of those KT90s and the output transformers downstream of them, but still the amplifier serves a very convincing rendition at modest listening levels.



It is able to deliver a decently high volume before it runs out of steam, and when it does, it does so gracefully, simply not going any louder despite continued twiddling of the volume knob. Settle the amp a little lower at a good level where it's not sitting on transients and squashing dynamics, and there's a wonderfully beguiling rendition of the song.

Match carefully with sensitive speakers and don't try to use it to power your next disco party, and you'll have an extremely capable performer with change to spare. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£995

TYPE
Integrated valve amplifier

WEBSITE
mingda.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 398

OUR VERDICT



Onkyo A-9010 (UK)



INSTEAD OF THE usual Class D modules you might expect for such a product, the A-9010 uses discrete low-impedance Darlington output transistors from Sanken running in Class AB. Many audiophiles still believe this to be the best compromise between sonics and practicality, but it's less common than it used to be. The result is a claimed 44W RMS per channel in an 8ohm load, which is just about enough to drive most speakers in most British rooms.

Sound quality

Right from switch on, I find the A-9010 (UK) particularly bouncy, with lots of energy and drive. This stands in marked contrast to the sat-upon sound that some rivals at or just slightly above its price serve up.

Listening to Kate Bush's *Cloudbusting* the Onkyo copes surprisingly well and rises to the challenge better than expected. Kate's voice sounds icy, yet doesn't veer into harshness – unlike

some budget amplifiers. It's a difficult one to get right, because many smooth amps flatten it and strip it of its sparkle, while brighter ones can grate. The A-9010 (UK) treads a well-judged middle path and places it fairly deep into the mix. Behind it sits those distinct sampled drum patterns, which can sound curtailed on lesser amplifiers because they're highly damped and nowhere near as lively as you would expect. Again it takes a sensible middle path, and seems fast and lithe enough to capture much of their energy and impact, without pushing them unduly to the fore.

Next up, Steely Dan's *Aja*. The title track proves impressive; Donald Fagen's voice can sound nasal and

forward, and the close-miked piano often comes over as brittle with cheap solid-state electronics; but the A-9010 (UK) takes things in its stride and shows its fine natural balance. It's quite a dynamic recording and so quite a workout for a relatively low-powered amplifier such as this, but the crashing drum kit breaks don't throw the Onkyo. In absolute terms, it doesn't quite have the range of a more powerful design at three times the price, but it seems to make the most of the power it has.

What it does right is something that plenty of amps costing many times as much can't do – which is to sound unerringly musical and fun, and what more can you ask? **DP**



DETAILS

PRICE
£200

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEBSITE
uk.onkyo.com

REVIEWED
HFC 398

OUR VERDICT





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Parasound Halo Integrated

Introducing Parasound's 'do-it-all' device. The Halo does everything it can be reasonably expected to, including connecting up to a variety of digital and analogue sources, delivering a fair whack of power into a wide range of loads and not being too big. It's hardly small, but then again it negates the need for separate preamp, power amp, DAC and phono stage boxes. The power amp has full dual mono construction and is said to work in Class A mode at lower levels, switching into Class AB when called on to deliver more power. The preamp has matched J-FET input stages and MOSFET driver stages, and sports its own MM/MC phono preamplifier. It also has the popular ESS Sabre32 ES9018K2M DAC and an asynchronous USB 2.0 input that supports PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz, and decodes native DSD64, DSD128, DSD256 and DoP DSD.

Sound quality

Fed by one of its RCA line-level inputs, the Halo gives a powerful and confident presentation; it is crisp and clear, and has a large and capacious soundstage that's peppered with detail. It shows little fear of driving difficult loads, and doesn't have such a distinct sound as its rivals. It's even handed and smooth, but good at delivering the musical minutiae that pulls you into a recording.

Steely Dan's *Any Major Dude* is not particularly complex by the band's

standards, and succeeds or fails on the hi-fi system's ability to correctly convey the timing and dynamics of the piece. This the Halo does rather well, giving a lively and open rendition that captures the spirit of the song with relish. This track can sound small in scale and anaemic on analytical equipment, but here it has a widescreen backdrop; with great scale from left to right, that falls back reasonably well too. Along with such a big presentation, it captures the delicate strummed acoustic guitar work very well, showing good midband speed and detail. Vocals are smooth and lack the slightly brittle edge of some rivals.

Asked to play some classic reggae, it again delivers an impressive sound. With Congo Ashanti's *Days Chasing Days* it is able to tickle the speakers sufficiently strongly to get them shifting large amounts of air in the room. It has a serious amount of power and it's served up without in anyway compromising other aspects of the sound. Despite so much low-frequency work, the midband remains smooth and crisp and nicely rhythmic. By absolute standards, compared with the biggest and best integrated amplifiers, the Halo doesn't have the fastest bass – right down low – there's a sense that it is doing some heavy heaving, but while not lightning fast it never really sounds strained.

Moving to slower, sweeter soul music in the shape of Isaac Hayes' *I*

Stand Accused, and the Parasound is in its absolute element. It has a pleasing tonality that's slightly on the warm side but never too sugary, and is well able to signpost the difference between sweet, lush-sounding productions and drier, more clinical ones. The Isaac Hayes track falls strongly on the former side, and the Halo gets the balance just right. Spacious and with an almost ethereal feel, this recording is brilliantly conveyed. There's a real delicacy to the midband, and it captures Hayes' creamy but sonorous voice just right. The accompanying piano is also spot on, sounding like it is there in the room, and the backing brass and strings are similarly rich and vibrant. The music is snappy and rolls along in a natural and engaging way, giving a delightful listening experience that catches the feel of the piece just right.

There's nothing not to like about this great value mid-price integrated amplifier. It's a jack of all trades and a master of many, with a very pleasing and musically enjoyable sound and a welter of facilities. Packed with features and with plenty of inputs, it will seamlessly slot into any middle-priced system to deliver performance and power aplenty. **DP**

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Parasound Halo Integrated

PRICE
£2,699

ORIGIN
USA/Taiwan

TYPE
2.1 integrated amplifier & DAC

WEIGHT
15kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
437 x 150 x 413mm

FEATURES
• Quoted power: 2x160W (8ohm)
• 5x RCA; 1x balanced XLR; MM/MC phono; 1x coaxial; 1x optical; USB inputs
• Balanced XLR; XLR sub; RCA sub; RCA record; RCA preamp outputs

DISTRIBUTOR
The Multi-Room Company

TELEPHONE
01242 511133

WEBSITE
multi-room.com

REVIEWED
HFC 404

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Powerful, spacious, musical sound; facilities; connectivity

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WESAY: Excellent, general-purpose integrated amplifier

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Primare

PRE32 & A34.2

Representing the preamp from Primare's 30 Series, the PRE32 has lots going for it. Equipped with plenty of analogue sockets (including balanced), a remote and an OLED display, our test model also comes packing Primare's MM30 media board, which slots into a port on the rear and ups its cost to £3,000. While this may seem like a bit of a price hike, it's actually great value given the MM30 is lifted directly from its £2,000 NP30 streamer (HFC 387) and comes brimming with a range of digital inputs, upsampling DAC and app-controlled streaming. Our test model is also the first to get Primare's new aptX Bluetooth module inside its case, which costs £180 fitted. Unlike many Bluetooth-equipped amps, it outputs the Bluetooth receiver's signal directly to its own sample rate converter and DAC for improved sound quality, where it's upsampled to 192kHz. Sharing the streamer module from the NP30 means the PRE32 gets the same Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC and SRC4392 24-bit/192kHz upsampling converter for digital duties.

Partnering the PRE32 is the A34.2 power amp that's housed in the same case with a simplified logo-embossed face plate. It incorporates a preamp stage comprised of Burr-Brown OPA2134 and Analogue Devices AD8512 op-amps, with two discrete UFPD amplifiers giving a substantial 2x 150W into 8ohm (claimed).

If you have the need for even more power, you also have the option to run two A34.2 amps in bridged mono mode, whereby each amp will give you a massive 550W to play with.

Sound quality

Whether streaming music over Bluetooth or piping hi-res audio through hard-wired USB and Ethernet connections, these amps have clarity in abundance. Streaming The Handsome Family's *Far From Any Road* at 320kbps via Spotify through my laptop doesn't draw attention to the shortcomings of this compressed format. Male and female vocals have surprising levels of depth and lifelike timbre while the trumpet's edges don't have that sense of being unnaturally curtailed. Compared with similarly priced streaming devices that I've recently plumbed into my reference system, the Primares sound less boxed in over Bluetooth. Channel separation and stereo imaging is impressively well rendered to the point that you sometimes have to look twice to realise you're not hearing a higher bitrate version. But while Bluetooth makes for a worthwhile inclusion, you really need to serve the Primares a richer diet to properly benefit from what they have to offer.

Exploring a 16-bit/44kHz FLAC rip of Future Islands' *Singles* streamed over Ethernet, lets you know that these amps relish having more to play with. Percussion on *Like The Moon* is

razor sharp, while bass guitar notes take on a textured, robust quality, and the keyboard's atmospherics go deep and wide within the soundstage as their delayed echoes trail off into the distance for a genuine sense of scale. But it's not just the Primares' timing and musical size that grabs your attention, it's the way the amps seem to stay true to the purity of the music, without being overly clinical. Despite this album's synthpop origins, the Primares are never artificial sounding. Even at low levels the way the music comes across undiluted nicely portrays all the fervour of the band's performance, while cranking up the volume brings the rawness of Samuel T Herring's vocals even closer. But that's not to suggest these amps are in any way forward sounding, because they're not. They are well focussed across every aspect of the audioband, and without any hint of colouration.

The Primares come top of the class for an enjoyable, accessible and rewarding user experience and are also blessed with a sonic finesse that opens up the music to show it at its best, while being equally forgiving of poorer sources. Treat them to some hi-res material and they'll really show you just what they're capable of. **AS**

DETAILS

PRODUCTS

Primare
PRE32/A34.2

PRICE
£3,180/£1,750

ORIGIN
Sweden

TYPE
Preamp fitted with network music player/DAC plus partnering Class D power amplifier

WEIGHT
10.5kg each

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 105 x 385mm

FEATURES

- Preamp with vTuner internet radio; upsampling DAC; network and aptX Bluetooth streaming
- Quoted power: 2x 150W (8ohm)
- Balanced inputs/outputs
- Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma-AV Ltd

TELEPHONE
01423 358846

WEBSITE
karma-av.co.uk;
primare.net

REVIEWED
HFC 393

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Class build and user interface; great streamer; balanced and clear sound

DISLIKE: Remote is no match for the app

WESAY: This elegant duo has poise and clarity in spades, and makes a refined and dynamic sound

Hifiman HE400i



BY USING PLANAR magnetic drivers, Hifiman has managed to differentiate itself from the field. This process offers some tangible benefits, but equally some clear downsides. The most important developments focus on improving the sensitivity of the design – something of an issue for many planar headphones – and then wrapping the results in a more comfortable shell.

By and large, the latter has been achieved with some success. The twin headband arrangement is rather large, but works extremely well. Weight distribution is extremely even across the headphone and the tractive force applied on either side of the head is enough to keep everything in place without digging into the side of the scalp. This makes it easy to wear for longer periods of time.

The attempts to improve the sensitivity have also been largely successful. As you might expect, Chord's impressive Hugo has no

issues driving the HE400i to high levels, but even on the end of an iPad the performance is refined and has none of the slightly strained quality that running insensitive headphones on low-powered amps can have.

The HE400i is entirely unsuitable for use on the move, but it is sensitive enough that you need not be tied to a headphone amplifier.

Sound quality

The performance with Public Service Broadcasting's *The Race For Space* is deeply impressive. The collection of samples, loops and guitar is handled with a panache and agility that gives a real sense of speed and attack. This is underpinned by truly excellent bass. Not only does the Hifiman go extremely deep, it has phenomenal detail retrieval and can provide tonality and texture to the low end, which greatly aids believability.

Against this, the upper frequencies have to make do with being merely



very good. With Drew Holcomb and the Neighbours' *Medicine*, there is plenty of detail and the presentation is wonderfully open, but if you push the Hifiman to very high levels, it can harden ever so slightly – although these levels are admittedly firmly on the antisocial side.

Throw in the great comfort and build, and you have a fine offering that should be high on any home headphone user's audition list. **ES**

DETAILS

PRICE
£369

TYPE
Open-back, over-ear headphone

WEBSITE
hifiman.com

REVIEWED
HFC 397

OUR VERDICT



Oppo PM-2

IN JUST A few short years, Oppo has unveiled three headphones with high-end planar magnetic drivers, one of which – the PM3 (opposite) – blew us away at the price. As with its PM-1 flagship, the PM-2 is an open-back design with swivel-able earcups. At 385g, it's not exactly light due to its use of magnet-reliant drivers – although it doesn't feel unnecessarily weighty on the head. There are some nice touches such as the brushed aluminium earcup frame and headband extension bar, but although nicely upholstered the PM-2 lacks the genuine soft leather of the flagship PM-1. The cost cutting isn't otherwise obvious, though, and this is an exceptionally well-constructed and good-looking headphone that will win plenty of admirers.

Like all other open-back designs there's not a tremendous amount of passive isolation from external noise when the PM-2 is placed on the head. Comfort levels are good,

however, and even the faux-leather pads feel pretty nice. Incidentally, the earpads can be swapped for the PM-1's superior lambskin or velour versions should additional comfort be required – not that it's needed.

Sound quality

The PM-2 is easy to drive and has a sound that is ultra-clean with an expansive soundstage. With the thicker cable fitted I'm instantly impressed by just how revealing it can be with good-quality source material. Jean Michel Jarre's *Oxygene IV* sounds utterly engaging, which is quite an achievement given that the original recording of the track is almost 40 years old and a familiar listening test piece to my ears.

The Oppo has a delicacy and intimacy about its presentation that places everything evenly across the soundstage with no hint of colouration across any part of the frequency range. The *Brandenburg Concerto No.3 in G*

Major is a fine example of how it manages to squeeze every last drop of detail out of the recording and despite listening to the track many times, I am convinced I can hear more subtle details as the orchestral players shuffle slightly with their instruments or take a breath moments before they begin to play, which helps to provide a more insightful and atmospheric portrayal of the recording.

Admittedly, bass levels aren't the deepest, but they're certainly tight and natural with Lorde's *Royals*. Vocals are where the PM-2 really shines and *Strange Kind Of Love* from Craig Armstrong's *It's Nearly Tomorrow* sounds very intimate and is easily my favourite performance of the test. **LD**



DETAILS

PRICE
£699

TYPE
Open-back, over-ear headphone

WEBSITE
oppodigital.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 402

OUR VERDICT



Oppo PM-3



IN THE CASE of its PM-2 cans (opposite), Oppo scores a real success, but at their upmarket price it's not that surprising. Much more impressive would be to pull off the same trick but at a significantly lower price point. Enter the £350 PM-3. More compact and with over-ear closed-back swivel-able cups, it's Oppo's stab at a portable design – an audacious fusion of trickle-down planar magnetic tech and high-street wearability at a price that must be leaving some rivals dazed.

Portable headphones with planar drivers are rare enough, but Oppo says the PM-3 also sets the bar for weight. But why all the fuss about planar magnetic drivers anyway? That's simple: sound quality. Oppo's contention is that the tech offers the best overall solution for the majority of customers who demand high-quality and hi-res sound, possessing many advantages over traditional dynamic driver technology, not least inherently lower distortion. But planar magnetic

drivers add the benefit of being potentially portable as, unlike electrostatic designs, they don't require a special desktop bias power supply and amplifier. Electrostatics arguably hold the upper hand when it comes to ultimate sound quality at home, but the planar magnetic route has practical benefits that offers more to a wider public and, therefore, a much better return on your investment.

Sound quality

The PM-3's 'house' sound is one of which Goldilocks herself would approve: just right. Transparent enough to easily differentiate between the sonic efforts of an iPhone or Samsung Galaxy *au naturel* and variously upgraded with the Oppo HA-2 amp/DAC (page 115) or Chord Hugo (*HFC* 386), the thing that really sticks out about the PM-3 is the way everything sounds so natural, unshowy and unforced. No bass bloat, no mid muddle, no treble tinsel – just



delicious weight and detail, nicely in proportion, convincingly imaged in three dimensions without falling into the trap of sounding overly airy. It creates a sense of ease that kills fatigue and reduces curiosity about how much better really pricey headphones might sound.

That it is also well made, looks smartly understated and remains comfortable to wear seals it an enthusiastic recommendation. **DV**

DETAILS

PRICE

£350

TYPE

Closed-back, over-ear headphone

WEBSITE

oppodigital.co.uk

REVIEWED

HFC 399

OUR VERDICT



Sony MDR-1ADAC

IT'S WIDELY RECOGNISED that using an external DAC with a portable device provides numerous benefits to the sound, but sometimes it's just a bit too much to have to carry around. And that's where the MDR-1ADAC comes in with its internal DAC. It also features a built-in S-master HX amp with 1,500mW of power handling and claimed sensitivity of 102dB/mW.

Sony has made provision for devices with a range of digital outputs comprising Apple's Lightning connector, micro-USB, USB and its own proprietary Walkman connection. You simply select the appropriate cable from the selection and plug it into the micro-USB input on the left enclosure. A separate micro USB input is provided exclusively for charging (four hours gives between seven or eight hours of playback).

The USB DAC is high-resolution 24-bit/192kHz-compatible and can handle DSD128 material (albeit by

converting them to PCM). The specially developed diaphragm combined with 40mm HD drivers claims to deliver a wide frequency response from 4Hz to 100kHz, dependent on the source.

Sound quality

With an iPhone 5, the performance bar is set very high using the analogue output in passive mode. These are extremely revealing cans, serving up impressive levels of detail across the dynamic range. With the soundtrack from *West Side Story* the oboes, clarinets, flutes and piccolos can be heard discretely and emphatically. As the strings, horns and percussion kick in, the piece has a terrific vitality and enthusiasm about it as the Sony reveals its competency with soundstaging and scale. Bass is as taut and punchy as a volley of jabs from Floyd Mayweather, Jr.

Hooked up to a Sony hi-res portable player (the NWZ-F886, reviewed *HFC* 381) with the original 24/96

download of David Bowie's *Valentine's Day*, there is a notable step up in texture and timing, transient notes are maximised and the emotional impact goes up a notch or two as you become less aware of the presence of the cans and focus more on the music. The guitars and Bowie's vocals benefit from the extra headroom. The delivery is consistent across all genres and holds up well when driven hard (although noise isolation is so good you rarely need to crank up the volume). Overall then, this is a really rewarding pair of headphones to own especially if you're a hi-res music enthusiast. **AJ**



DETAILS

PRICE

£250

TYPE

Closed-back, over-ear headphone/DAC

WEBSITE

sony.co.uk

REVIEWED

HFC 397

OUR VERDICT



Super Size Sound

End user's experience with Maximum Supertweeters in his system.

For me the best placement was dead center top, in line with my tweeters, and at a level depth, flush with the front baffle of the main speakers.

With cables, connections and positioning all satisfied I spun my first critical tune and sat down for a listen..

..Wow.. The sound had changed, and not a tiny change either, quite a discernible change. The sound stage has grown, the whole sound has matured not just at the high frequency range but across the whole range! Vocals sound fuller and more correct, breaths on wind instruments were real, violin and strings in general sounds as real as I've heard on my system to date and atmosphere on live recordings were more perceptible. Without exception one of the best purchases I have made within Hi-Fi. If I could compare Hi-Fi to food it would be like adding a little bit of salt to the food, the flavour was always there, but the salt just makes the flavours stand out more and adds a further dimension to the complete flavour.

That's what the Maximum Supertweeters have done for my set up. Just as a well set up subwoofer adds to the fullness and roundness of the sound, the Supertweeter does the same also, just tailor the level to your preference and system matching and away you go.

Removing them after a few days has made the sound dull, flat and even two dimensional. Was that really what I was calling decent quality Hi-Fi a couple of weeks ago?! What I had thought was a pretty good sound was now without the Supertweeters only mediocre in terms of sound quality. The difference was a night and day one. So obviously they were welcomed with open arms and re-instated into the system once I had established there was a "gap" without them. On first play the smile returned to my face and I earnestly started to rummage through my

music collection to get another playlist together.

At which point I should also tell you that I found the effect was still there even at night time listening levels, but it does need a few decibels to be "magical".

My 15W per channel Leak valve amps had no problems with the load on top of my speakers and when using full range "horn" speakers, these Supertweeters are simply a must have item and being quite minimal in operation they don't seem to destroy the single driver sound of a good Lowther or Fostex, rather adding to it to give a fuller sound so long as you are careful with the volume level. Discretion is the key, and blending without over exuberance or understatement is a must and worth taking the time to tune in and get right because when you do, the sound is simply stunning...

...In conclusion, my humble opinion can only be used as a guide because we all hear differently and we all like a different sound. The Townsend Maximum Supertweeters are well executed, well made, capable, very discrete super tweeters. In my opinion in terms of user friendliness and sound they are the best passive super tweeters I have heard on the market today and the fact I have purchased a pair with my own hard earned money is testament to how good they are and the impact they have had on the sound of my system. I am not going to get into the "snake oil" debate because they work within my hearing range and with all of the formats I use. Lossless on the MacBook, DAB, Cd and analogue, vinyl and tape cassette all benefit from a fuller more emotional sound.



Science is great, and will one day crack cancer and HIV but it struggles to quantify certain things in life and one of those things is emotion. I'm sure my hearing doesn't extend much above 16kHz or so and yet the super tweeters work and work well for me.

I think transients, atmosphere, detail, attack and sustain all benefit as does timbre between instruments, sounds and especially vocals within the hearing range due to less distortion, less smearing and better definition at frequency extremes. Definitely not snake oil in my opinion..

..A worthwhile investment and I will not be returning them or selling them on.

*Many Thanks and keep the music musical.
Patrick Thomas.*



TOWNSHEND

Engineering Hi-Fi since 1975

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WWW.TOWNSHENDAUDIO.COM
Email mail@townshendaudio.com or phone on +44 (0) 20 8979 2155

Creek OBH-21 mk2



THE CREEK HAS enough power to provide output to two 6.35mm headphone sockets. These can have their gain and load settings adjusted via dip switches, although any changes made apply to both sockets. Both the inputs and the outputs on the rear allow it to function as a conventional loopthrough and as a single input preamp, which might come in rather handy.

With appropriate gain settings applied for Oppo's PM-3 headphones (page 113), it hits the test level without difficulty and has plenty in reserve should you need it.

DETAILS

PRICE
£325

TYPE
Headphone amplifier
WEBSITE
creekaudio.com

REVIEWED
HFC 403

OUR VERDICT



Sound quality

This is not a product that clubs you over the head with a single aspect of its performance, but this is to miss its strengths. It engages across all test pieces and rarely puts a foot wrong. The presentation is slightly smaller scale than some rivals, but not to a point that is constraining. Regina

Spektor's *Consequence Of Sounds* provides a wonderful sense of intimacy. Her voice is brilliantly defined and works perfectly against the struck piano keys, which have real weight and depth to them. Melnikov's interpretation of Schumann's *Piano Trio No.2 in F Major* is also scaled very well and once again the tonality and decay to all of the instruments is consistently and unfailingly believable.

Where the Creek really shines, though, is when you ask it to pick up the pace with Hot Chip's *Don't Deny Your Heart* and Joe Satriani's *Lost In A Memory*. While it remains scrupulously accurate with superb tonality throughout, it also has a sense of timing and fun that makes this sort of music shine. It sounds fast and engaging where some rivals sound slightly matter of fact and it manages to do this while producing wonderfully deep, clean and detailed



bass. This impressive balance of refinement, accuracy and speed makes the OBH-21 mk2 extremely easy to listen to for long periods, but equally something that delivers an effortless five-minute pickup with your favourite track.

The Creek isn't the most feature-packed or visually dramatic product we've seen, but it consistently delivers a sound that is informative and entertaining in equal measure. The feature count isn't huge but the functions it has are certainly useful and combined with the appealing price, it makes a great product. **ES**

Oppo HA-2

WITH DIMENSIONS PRETTY

much identical to those of a regular-sized iPhone 6 (and its own N1 smartphone), Oppo's headphone amp/DAC is supplied with a sturdy pair of rubber bands for lassoing the pair together back-to-back when music is required on the move. A small slider button on the bottom is used to select one of the three inputs. The one located on top of the unit, like the headphone output next to it, is a 3.5mm mini plug socket and doubles as a line-out should you want to use the HA-2 as a DAC in a larger setup. Occupying the bottom side are a USB-A socket for Apple devices and a USB micro-B socket for Android and other smartphones.

The HA-2 is good for 13 hours use if you're plugged into an analogue input and seven hours via the digital USB, but it can also be configured to charge your smartphone. There is a switch that activates the 'bass boost' function and one that toggles

between low and medium gain for matching with headphones of different sensitivities.

Sound quality

Even with CD-quality files it quickly becomes clear from the opening moments that the HA-2's idea of music making is a world away from what the iPad can manage on its own. Bigger for a start, instantly making headphone listening a more expansive experience. Presentation is appreciably weightier and richer, too, gaining a sense of solidity and authority that is very powerful.

The best kind of headphone listening should have this almost palpable realism, and here it does. Orchestral brass at full tilt sounds convincingly bright and metallic, but crucially delivers a whole world of harmonics and microdynamic contrasts. With simpler vocal fare there's no doubting the HA-2's sound is detailed, atmospheric and

insightful, especially with hi-res tracks and yet it retains an effortless musicality.

On Sting's live set, *All This Time*, the rich double bass and piano accompaniment to his rasping vocal on *Moon Over Bourbon Street* are simply mesmerising to hear.

Swapping the HA-2 for the Hugo (HFC 386) is fascinating and the vastly more expensive Chord doesn't have things all its own way sonically, sounding a tad leaner and less polished than the Oppo. But it's the Hugo's whisper-to-whirlwind dynamics, speed and timing that blow the HA-2 away.

If the HA-2 isn't quite the last word in headphone amplifier/DAC performance, it's comfortably the best we've heard at the price, a dream to use, extremely well made and featured, and it looks very cool. If your phone is as smart as it thinks it is, it should enjoy the ride. **DV**



DETAILS

PRICE
£259

TYPE
Portable headphone amplifier/DAC

WEBSITE
oppodigital.co.uk
REVIEWED
HFC 397

OUR VERDICT



Audio-Technica AT33PTG/II



THE BASIC DESIGN of the AT33 is over 30 years old and visually, the large, flat-sided body has not changed significantly in that time. On paper the measured performance of the PTG/II is similar to the Audio-Technica's AT33EV but one immediately noticeable aspect of the more expensive cartridge is that the output drops from 0.5mV to 0.3mV and means that the PTG/II will place greater demands on your phono stage. The payoff is that it should offer lower distortion than an elliptical one.

Sound quality

The AT33 family has faced accusations over the years of being overly safe sounding and if you have a particularly warm or smooth system, it might still be a bit too soft. But in a more neutral setup, it has enough bite to be a good match.

This newfound edge has not come at the expense of the more

traditional skills of the AT33, however. It has a wonderful midrange that lavishes richness and detail on voices and instruments and in doing so gives recordings spaciousness and three dimensionality that is immensely rewarding.

With Brandon Flowers' *The Desired Effect*, it is able to keep up with the quick and lively presentation while giving full attention to the vocals and their supporting arrangements. There is sufficient refinement to ensure that you can spend hours listening, but it never tips over into being dull.

In terms of overall behaviour, the MicroLinear stylus delivers on the claimed reduction in distortion, too. Provided that alignment is in any way correct in the arm, the PTG/II shows no sign at all of distortion or hardening as it moves towards the centre of a record. It has a very low noise floor and seems usefully resistant to minor damage or debris on records. While the demands it



places on a phono stage in terms of gain are quite high, it does a fine job of only sending the signal rather than noise to be boosted and this means that it does well at delivering the supposed benefits of the moving coil design.

It is not a gigantic leap forward over the standard EV version, which should not be a surprise given how close they are in price and how much of the basic design and layout they share. The small extra outlay delivers a meaningful boost in performance, however, and the extra liveliness and control that it provides makes this a very fine product that represents an impressive bargain at the price. **ES**

DETAILS

PRICE
£420

TYPE
Moving coil cartridge

WEBSITE
eu.audio-technica.com

REVIEWED
HFC 402

OUR VERDICT



Black Rhodium Opus

THE OPUS IS an unscreened speaker cable that makes use of high-purity tinned copper wire for its conductors. This is surrounded with Black Rhodium's signature silicone rubber insulation that's twisted together internally for excellent noise rejection and finished off in a no-nonsense white outer jacket. With an outside diameter of only 6.2mm and a highly flexible and smooth outer surface, it's ideally suited for installation work where the cable has to be navigated around tight corners.

The Opus loudspeaker cable is terminated with good-quality gold-plated banana plugs, which are colour-coded red and black. Cable direction is indicated on the sleeve at each end. This is particularly important for the Opus as it has been manufactured to ensure the

individual positive and negative leads run in the opposite direction from when they were extruded relative to each other. Black Rhodium says this approach ensures consistent and superior stereo imaging, as well as low background noise.

Sound quality

The Opus is comfortably one of the most flexible cables on the market and its small diameter will be a real plus for those who wish to conceal cables under a carpet. It may be

small, but it packs one hell of a punch. The Thierry Maillard Trio's *Beyond The Ocean* sounds super clear with great imaging complemented by tight bass, while Elbow's *One Day Like This* shows that it is equally at home with vocals and has excellent detail and particularly good imaging. The latter is demonstrated by a clear distinction between the vocals in front and the instrumental backing behind.

In short, it is as comfortable with jazz as it is with classical or rock music. Well worth an audition. **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE
£108/3m pair

TYPE
Loudspeaker cable

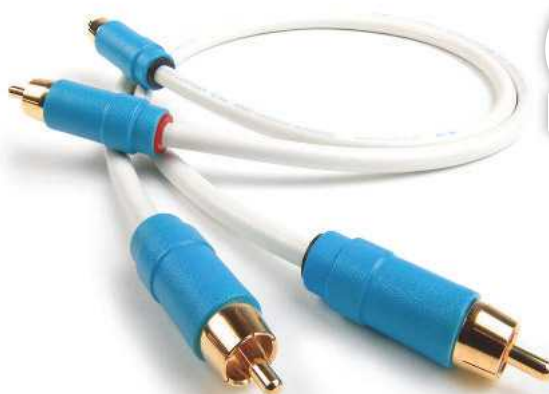
WEBSITE
blackrhodium.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 401

OUR VERDICT



The Chord Company C-Line



DETAILS

PRICE
£45

TYPE
1m RCA
interconnect

WEBSITE
chord.co.uk

REVIEWED
HFC 403

OUR VERDICT



FEATURING TUNED ARAY

technology originally developed for Chord's flagship Sarum range, the C-Line claims to offer improvements in detail and transparency of sound. Its conductors are manufactured from oxygen-free copper and are constructed in a pseudo-balanced configuration with fully floating high-performance shielding.

Direct gold-plating technology and over-moulded strain-relief for the phono plugs is also adopted.

Sound quality

Impressively, the C-Line is no slouch when it comes to conveying exuberance and excitement.

Dvorak's *Symphony No.9* shows the brass section leaping furiously across the musical score with plenty of energy, yet somehow with refinement. The latter quality is

something I have come to expect from silver conductors and I'm surprised to find this being demonstrated with the interconnects' solid copper. *Bolero* is equally polished and captivating.

GoGo Penguin's *Murmuration* really exemplifies the extended and smooth bass response, with the bass drum in the opening sequence being almost felt rather than heard. The crispness of the drum rhythms as the piece progresses is quite excellent and the build up to the final climax is both

energetic and extremely lively. The result is that the overall performance never feels strained and you don't sense that the players are running out of steam.

Vivaldi's *Concerto In A Minor* is lively and involving. In particular, the complex character of the instruments is beautifully conveyed. The delicate playing of the oboe is very evocative, especially in the *Largo*, and the emotion of the piece is all there to be enjoyed. **NR**

Quadraspire QAVX

BEING ABLE TO choose the spec you require for your stand is one of the beauties of the QAVX, and the configuration builder on the website allows for at least eight shelves to be selected. These can be anything between 100 and 326mm apart and the width is fixed at a big but not unmanageable 1,630mm. There's a variety of wood and glass finishes on offer, and neat tricks like the slight curve on the leading edge means it feels more like a piece of furniture than something you stand kit on. The build quality is excellent. The columns countersink into the shelves and then screw together so that it's both rigid and solid.

Sound quality

Sonically, the most significant advantage here is that the size and cumulative mass it has – certainly in our four-shelf review sample – means it provides an almost completely inert base for equipment. This is

most noticeable with turntables placed on the top shelf that are impressively decoupled from the activities of speakers and the like on the same floor. There is a complete absence of low-level interference on any equipment I place on it and even with a product susceptible to valve microphony, the isolation is impressive.

None of this capable isolation seems to come at the expensive of altering the overall tonal balance of the equipment in use. With the wood finished shelving, there is no suggestion of additional brightness creeping into the performance, but equally the detail and vibrancy of my Naim equipment is entirely intact. Judging the neutrality of any support is no easy task, but the Quadraspire goes a long way towards achieving such a presentation.

This is undoubtedly a specialist product as there is only a small subset of customers that will need the



considerable storage capacity that it offers. If you do need capacity for six or more components – particularly if any of them are AV focused – the QAVX is a genuinely well thought out product that manages to combine enormous potential storage with a room-friendly finish.

Above all, it delivers all of the performance of the more conventional stereo Quadraspire racks, which means that if you do have a sprawling system to accommodate, the QAVX is a clever and seriously talented and practical solution to the problem. **ES**

DETAILS

PRICE
From £560

TYPE
Equipment rack

WEBSITE
quadraspire.com

REVIEWED
HFC 395

OUR VERDICT



Music Hardware Product of the Year

Music Industries Association

"Amazing
Reproduction...
The Egg 150s
sound incredible"

Ask Audio Mag

"...the performance
of these small
monitors is truly
unbelievable."

DJ Mag
DJ Star Product

"...the EGG100s
hold their
own against
anything else"
Sound on Sound

"certainly one of
the best sounding
pairs of speakers
I've ever tried"

Future Music 10/10
Platinum Award

"the Egg 150 system is
simply amazing"

ProTools Expert

"impossibly 'high-end'
given the modest price
of the system."

HiFi Choice 5 star award

"Crystal clear imaging..."

MTM: 9/10 Choice Award

"The manufacturing
is of impeccable
quality...the speakers
are peerless."

Keyboard Recording



MunroSonic®



Musicreviews



Pink Floyd The Endless River

★★★★★

HOT PICK

CD Parlophone

AFTER 20 YEARS of silence following 1994's *The Division Bell*, most of us had assumed that Pink Floyd's tide had ebbed for the final time and would not flow again. Now to our considerable surprise comes *The Endless River*. The death six years ago of keyboardist Rick Wright left only guitarist David Gilmour and drummer Nick Mason as surviving members (Roger Waters having departed in 1985) – but in many ways it is the ghost of Wright that dominates this 'new' recording. The source of *The Endless River* lies in the material recorded in sessions for *The Division Bell* by Wright, Gilmour and Mason. It transpires that more than 20 hours of music was recorded and that the original intention was that *The Division Bell* was to be a double album, with one disc of songs and the second consisting of ambient instrumental jams. In the event, the second disc was shelved, but around a year ago amid considerable secrecy, Gilmour and

Mason began reworking the unused material. The result is far more than simply the second part of *The Division Bell*, delivered two decades later as the original 1994 pieces have been radically retooled via a complex process of mixing, overdubbing and adding new material to create what co-producer Phil Manzanera calls "a Pink Floyd album for the 21st century".

Divided into four distinct parts – described on the record itself as "sides" and each between 12 and 15 minutes long – *The Endless River* will delight long-term fans of the Floyd's classic, spacey ambience. Essentially an instrumental album, most of the traditional Floyd trademarks are here in excelsis – ethereal synths, experimental loops and snippets of conversation (including the synthesised voice of Stephen Hawking borrowed from his appearance in a 1994 BT commercial), soaring melodic guitar solos from Gilmour, gently pastoral

acoustic passages and swelling organ arpeggios – the latter sampled from a recording of Wright playing the mighty Albert Hall organ during the soundcheck for a 1969 performance. In fact, much of the architecture of the music is deliberately built around Wright's keyboards as a tribute to the Floyd's fallen colleague. Despite the cut-and-paste construction that required the attention of four producers at different stages of the process – Manzanera, Martin Glover (aka Youth), the group's long-serving engineer Andy Jackson and Gilmour himself – there's a surprisingly cohesive quality and the album concludes triumphantly with the only conventional 'song', Gilmour's *Louder Than Words* on which he sings: "We bitch and we fight, but this thing that we do it's louder than words, the sum of our parts, the beat of our hearts." As a requiem for one of the most iconic bands of all time, it's damn near perfect. **NW**



D'Angelo & The Vanguard

Black Messiah

★★★★★

CD

Sony

ALBUMS THAT TAKE 15 years to make (D'Angelo's last release, the Grammy-winning *Voodoo*, appeared in 2000) ought to be destined to disappoint, but *Black Messiah* sounds like a genuine masterpiece, a record that reinvents what we used to call soul music and makes R&B sound as thrillingly experimental in 2015 as Sly Stone did in the late sixties, Funkadelic in the seventies, Prince in the eighties and the Fugees in the nineties.

A nonchalantly timeless vision that's dense, complex, audacious and epic in scope

Recorded and mixed in analogue with no digital loops, programmes or plug-ins, there's nothing retro about this nonchalantly timeless back-to-the-future vision, which manages to sound familiar yet new and unprecedented at the same. Dense, complex, audacious and epic in scope, itchy funk, languid beats, jazz syncopation, sophisticated strings and amniotic harmonies create a rich mix of vintage deep soul and post hip-hop modernism. **NW**



Béla Fleck & Abigail Washburn

Béla Fleck & Abigail Washburn

★★★★★

CD

Rounder

AS THE WORLD'S premier banjo player, Fleck has expanded the instrument's repertoire and reputation and won a record-breaking 15 Grammy awards as he's ranged across jazz, classical and world music. Here he returns thrillingly to the instrument's folk/country/bluegrass roots on a set that includes trad Appalachian ballads and original compositions. Sung in deathless, keening fashion by his wife, the only accompaniment comes from the couple's two banjos, but they produce such a rich palette of sounds that you'd swear a full band was at work. Another Grammy surely looms for Americana album of the year. **NW**



Rebecca Ferguson

Lady Sings The Blues

★★★★★

CD

RCA Records

FOR HER THIRD album the finest pop/soul voice of recent years tackles the songbook of Billie Holiday – with a high level of success. It's a tough act to follow, but despite the similarities in her vocal stylings she doesn't attempt a retread of the legendary singer's works. The arrangements are lush and romantic without being trite, inspired by the past but not in thrall to it. Recorded at Capitol Studios in LA, the sound is rich and warm with full horn and string sections, but there's plenty of space for Ferguson's expressive voice to wrap itself around the melodies and deliver a series of heartfelt interpretations of some terrific tunes. **DO**



Giuliano Carmignola

Bach Violin Concertos
Concerto Köln

★★★★★

CD

DG Archiv

A fine recording of a beautifully executed performance

CARMIGNOLA PLAYS VERY accurately, and the solo part is very well executed, technically. But there's also a welcome edge to the playing that really lifts the music out of the routine. Rhythms are springy and buoyant, and the interpretations have plenty of fire and life. We get the two regular solo concertos, plus the double and two 'reconstructions' of lost originals from Bach's harpsichord concertos – including a gritty probing account of the great D minor concerto BWV 1052. Archiv's recording is crisp and immediate, with lots of bite. Yet the upper partials avoid edginess, and tonally the sound is natural and well balanced; close, but with space around the instruments. **JH**

AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

Freddie Hubbard Straight Life

180g vinyl

CTI/Pure Pleasure



IN 1970 FREDDIE

Hubbard, Joe Henderson, Herbie Hancock, George Benson, Ron Carter, Jack DeJohnette, Richard Landrum and Weldon Irvine went

into Rudy van Gelder's studio and brewed up a groove so audacious it may never be equalled. It's one hell of a lineup, old-school horn players meet new generation guitar, piano and drums, so the music they make reflects the crossover. Powerful funk rhythms underpinning vibrant solos from trumpet, sax, conga, keys and guitar.

Straight Life captures the vibe found on Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*, it's rhythmically stronger and less challenging, and more of a collaboration. It may be Hubbard's name on the cover, but this is very much an ensemble creation. Only the final track, *Here's That Rainy Day*, a duet with Benson, puts him in the lead for any duration. This short album has just three tracks, but they contain more insight, intensity, tone and vibe than most. Heavy but light, multi-layered yet intrinsically legible, this is the distilled essence of a finely honed groove. It is also a great recording with more inner detail and low-end welly than most of its era. Van Gelder plus CTI equals the dope and Pure Pleasure is the icing on a rich sonic cake. **JK**



HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS


Buddy Guy
 Born To Play
 Guitar


AIFF 24-bit/96kHz

hdtracks.com

79-YEAR-OLD BUDDY GUY is back with his 28th studio album with tributes to old friends BB King and Muddy Waters on *Flesh & Bone* and *Come Back Muddy*, as well as guest appearances by Van Morrison, Joss Stone, Kim Wilson and Billy Gibbons. There's a rawness to the production that makes you feel like you're in a rowdy Chicago bar. "I'm gonna wear you out... I ain't gonna stop," he belligerently hollers on *Wear You Out*, and you don't doubt it. **PH**


Craig Armstrong
 It's Nearly
 Tomorrow


ALAC 24-bit/96kHz

Naim Label

THE SOUNDTRACK MAESTRO has finally found time to produce his first solo album for 10 years and it's a cracker. As we've come to expect, there's a mix of songs and short symphonic works, plus a couple of appearances from guest vocalists Brett (Suede) Anderson and Paul (The Blue Nile) Buchanan. It does nothing to break new ground for Armstrong fans, but it's a beautiful-sounding record that deserves to be heard widely. **DO**



With 41 CDs, there's plenty here to delight and amaze

Phase 4 Stereo

Stereo Concert Series



41 CDs

Decca

PHASE FOUR WAS launched by Decca in 1962 to offer listeners vivid exaggerated stereo to make the most of their hi-fi. It was loud, brash, and fun! You either loved it or hated it. The sixties PFS recordings have a bright vivid sound that's immediate and exciting, but lacking in refinement and finesse. By the mid seventies, things had moved on. Much of what's included here has been issued before, and it doesn't sound like it's been remastered. The original LP sleeves are reproduced 'as was', but extra (unlisted) works have been added. It's a bit of a mixed bag, and not for the purist audiophile. But there's plenty here to delight and amaze – Phase Four was gaudy and vulgar, but never dull! **JH**


**Alice Sara Ott
& Francesco
Tristano**
 Scandale


4 CDs

DG

THE MAIN WORK here is *Rite Of Spring*, in Stravinsky's version for two pianos. It receives a barnstorming interpretation from Ott and Tristano, who play with great fervour and passion. The performance is full of fire, yet extremely precise and together – two musicians playing as one. The added 'bass drum' effect towards the close of part one sounds effective too – though would Stravinsky have approved? DG's recording is sonorous and weighty, with good dynamic range and excellent clarity. Two pianos produce a big sound and the effect is strong and powerful, with bright ringing top notes and powerful bass. **JH**

BLU-RAY DVD


The Doors
 Feast Of Friends

Blu-ray

Eagle Vision



Jim Morrison and Ray Manzarek met at the UCLA Film School and this series of short films was made by fellow student Paul Ferrara. Originally hired to take stills, he realised the band's documentary potential

and made this collection of films. The earliest footage was done without sound so music is overdubbed, but there is some live material including a great version of *The End* that is distinctly live. The sound is amped up and polished with more bass than the originals, but it doesn't intrude. **JK**

Can a £39 insect make all your CD files sound better than Hi-Res?

Yes and no: Using the same equipment and a quality DAC, a 24/96 file (for example) will always sound better than a CD 16/44.1 file ... but, even a single JitterBug will often allow a CD file to be more musical and more emotionally stimulating than a Hi-Res file without the benefit of a JitterBug.

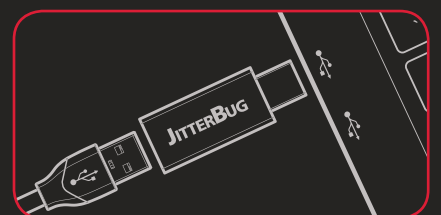
Noise is the problem. Real noise—the kind you can't hear directly. Most often, the word "noise" is used to describe tape hiss or a scratch on a record, but these sounds aren't noise; they are properly reproduced sounds that we wish weren't there.

Problem noise is essentially random, resonant or parasitic energy, which has no meaning. It can't be turned into discrete sounds, but it does compromise signal integrity and the performance of everything it touches.

JitterBug's dual-function line-conditioning circuitry greatly reduces the noise and ringing that plague both the data and power lines of USB ports, whether on a computer, streamer, home stereo or car audio front-panel USB input.

A single JitterBug is used in between devices (i.e., in series) as shown below. For an **additional "wow" experience**, try a second JitterBug into another USB port on the same device (such as a computer). Whether the second port is vacant, or is feeding a printer or charging a phone, JitterBug's noise-reduction ability is likely to surprise you. No, the printer won't be affected—only the audio!

While a JitterBug helps MP3s sound a lot more like music, high-sample-rate files have the most noise vulnerability. Try a JitterBug or two on all your equipment, but never more than two per USB bus. There is such a thing as too much of a good thing.





Jimi Hendrix Experience

Freedom: Atlanta Pop Festival

★★★★★

2 CDs

Sony Legacy

RECORDED IN JULY 1970 two months before his death, Hendrix's performance at the Atlanta Pop Festival – an event billed as 'the Woodstock of the South' – has long been a favourite among collectors on bootleg. The rest of us can now hear why. Backed by Billy Cox on bass and Mitch Mitchell on drums in front of an audience of 300,000 on a sweltering Georgia night, it surely ranks as one of the most intense and potent sets of his life.

Hendrix tells the crowd: "I hope it's not too loud for you, but if it is, we can always turn it up"

Far superior to his final UK appearance at the Isle of Wight a month later, we get arguably the best ever versions of several Hendrix classics and you can hear how he's enjoying himself when at the end of *Fire* he tells the crowd: "I hope it's not too loud for you, but if it is, we can always turn it up". The sound quality is spectacular, too; such skilled remastering deserves an award. **NW**



Hybrid SACD

Vaughan Williams

Concerto For Two Pianos, A London Symphony, Royal Scottish National Orchestra

★★★★★

Dutton Epoch

MARTIN YATES GIVES us the second (1920) version of VW's *London Symphony*, allowing us to hear music that the composer cut from the more familiar revised 1930 version – albeit less than in Richard Hickox's wonderful Chandos account of the original (longer) 1913 score. Yates takes the symphony quite fast, and perhaps misses some of its poetry and atmosphere, though the results are certainly exciting and enjoyable. The two-piano concerto is given a big barnstorming performance that takes no prisoners, and the SACD recording is sonorous and powerful, with good dynamics and clarity, albeit a touch hard at times. **JH**



Mahler

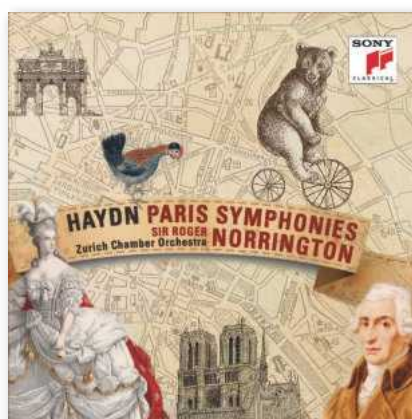
Decca – The Mono Years 1944-56

★★★★★

53-CD box set

Decca

THIS SUMPTUOUS 53-CD box set restores many classic Decca recordings, using the original sleeve designs to create a collector's dream. Among many gems is Decca's first LP of Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, conducted by Ernest Ansermet. Several omissions are surprising, but the selection is a good mix of well-known and rare material. The recordings for the most part carry their years lightly, sounding sharp, open and remarkably clear. Clarity and focus were always 'mono' trademarks, and the ear soon adjusts to the lack of stereo spread and depth. There's also an interesting book with some wonderful vintage photographs. **JH**



Haydn

The Paris symphonies
Zurich Chamber Orchestra

★★★★★

3 CDs

Sony Classical

IN THIS NEW set of the six Paris symphonies, Roger Norrington directs a group of about 30 musicians playing on modern instruments. The result is historically informed, without sounding acerbic in terms of sonority. The playing has the sort of rich lively brilliance and vivacity we used to enjoy from bands like the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. The execution is superlative; so good, I'm tempted to say these works have never been played better on record – I can't think of a superior set. The recordings are superb too; clear, open, and lively, with plenty of attack, yet clean despite sounding crisp and immediate. The three CDs are offered for the cost of one, making this a real bargain. **JH**



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AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

Jan Garbarek & The Hilliard Ensemble

Officium

2x 180g vinyl

ECM



EXACTLY 20 YEARS

after its original release ECM has seen fit to press this seminal album onto heavyweight 180g vinyl. The idea of combining a

choral ensemble with the tenor and soprano saxophones of Jan Garbarek came from ECM founder and producer Manfred Eicher, a man who regularly brings together unlikely combinations of musicians.

But this particular musical meeting has proved to be one of his most successful, the brass instruments working very much like a voice alongside the four singers in the highly

reverberant monastery of St. Gerold, Walsertal, in Austria where it was made. The deeper instrument works quite beautifully as an accompaniment; it doesn't have the same radiance of the treble sax, but adds to the depth of the songs, pieces from the 13th to 16th centuries by a variety of composers.

The layering of voices is powerful and rich and combined with Garbarek's improv makes for an immensely beautiful sound. His contributions vary from the subtle to the centre stage and on side two he does the latter in spectacular fashion. It's an amazing recording that scales the heights of dynamics and imaging, and sounds even more glorious on the ultimate format. **JK**



Low
Ones And Sixes



CD

Sub Pop

HUSBAND AND WIFE team Alan Sparhawk and Mimi Parker have rightly ascended to the throne of American folk rock, thanks to a career built on the back of mournful vocals and atmospheric vignettes. This, their 11th LP, continues the good work, providing more epic soundscapes. Suffused with electronic glitches and beats that complement the twangy guitars nicely, Sparhawk and Parker's trademark harmonising lend the 12 tracks a mournful, pastoral quality. You'll need a good system to handle the range of frequencies covered, but once again Low produces music of depth and deceptive complexity. It's country music without being country music. **PH**



Mahler
Symphony No.9
Seoul Philharmonic
Orchestra
Myun-Whun Chung



CD

DG

DG IS, WITHOUT question, the label of great Mahler nines. Guilini, Karajan, Bernstein and Abbado left big footsteps in which to follow. But even in such exalted company, Chung's reading stands its ground. His performance sounds expansive without feeling slow. It has some of the fiery energy of Abbado's Vienna recording, rather than the sovereign weighty depth of Guilini or Karajan. He shapes the work with great sensitivity and DG's live recording sounds clear and spacious, with a wide dynamic range. It successfully conveys a natural 'concert hall' sound, while allowing lots of subtle inner detail to be heard. **JH**



If volume 1 is this good, we can't wait for the follow up

Janáček

Orchestral Works Volume 1
Jean-Efflam Bavouzet (piano),
Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, Edward Gardner



CD/SACD

Chandos

VOLUME 1 IN a projected complete orchestral works of Janáček series, the disc gets off to a good start with a rousing account of that great showpiece *Sinfonietta*. The performance is crisp and full of detail, though at times one wishes for something earthier and more elemental. The Chandos recording is bright and clear, sounding immediate and dynamic, with good clarity and detail. You notice these qualities best in the *Vixen* suite and *Capriccio*, especially with an increase in volume level. The dense scoring of *Sinfonietta* is always a challenge, but the recording clarifies the inner detail while expanding impressively for the big moments. **JH**



Henri Dutilleux
Edition
Various performers



Six CDs

Deutsche Grammophon

THIS EXCELLENT 6-CD set brings together a good cross section of Dutilleux's music in various forms – orchestral, chamber, solo piano, song, and instrumental. The recordings mostly date between 1994 and 2010, and are of high quality. The earliest dates from 1971, but is technically excellent. The music is well crafted, worthwhile, and will repay close attention and study. DG itself never really recorded much Dutilleux, so this set is essentially a compilation taken from Decca, Philips, ECM, Sony, and Erato sources. With an excellent 12-page essay on the man and his music, this is an impressive issue that deserves to reach a wide audience! **JH**

BLU-RAY DVD ★★★★★

Foo Fighters
Sonic Highways

DVD

RCA



This substantial release charts Dave Grohl and his band recording eight tracks in eight American cities, and each episode includes an in-depth documentary about the musical history of that city.

The Chicago episode covers the blues and punk scenes as well as Cheap Trick's guitarist Rick Nielsen, who joins them in the studio. But it also has a lot about Buddy Guy who unsurprisingly does not. This is a gripping eight-plus hours for any music lover. Sound quality is about par, dynamics are quashed but that doesn't get in the way of 'musical maps'. **JK**

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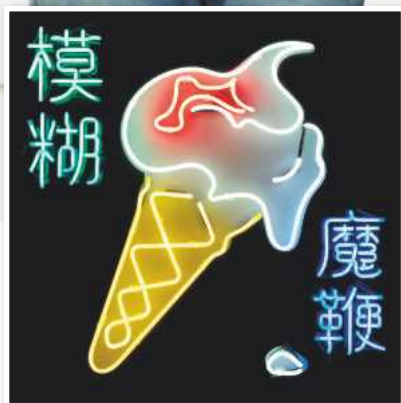


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HOT PICK

Blur The Magic Whip

★★★★★

CD Parlophone

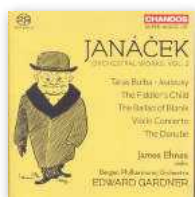
IN THE YEARS since Damon Albarn put Blur on hiatus in 2003, he has bloomed into the smartest, most ambitious and interesting British pop star of his generation. While his one-time rival from the Brit-pop wars, Oasis, have repeated themselves with ever diminishing returns, Albarn has embarked upon a giddily audacious range of eclectic projects. There was the hip-hop electronica of his cartoon band Gorillaz; the Chinese opera *Monkey – Journey To The West*; a tie up with the Clash's Paul Simonon in *The Good, The Bad and The Queen*; his adventures in Mali and beyond with Africa Express and a grown-up English opera about the Elizabethan occultist John Dee. He's also released a musical based on *Alice In Wonderland*. In between, there have been a handful of Blur reunion concerts, but with so much else going on in Albarn's endlessly inventive musical churn, the sudden

appearance of Blur's first album since 2003's *Think Tank* – and the first to feature guitarist Graham Coxon since 1999 – comes as a joyous surprise. Albarn once said that the moment he felt he was repeating himself was the day he would retire. No chance of that, for *The Magic Whip* represents another brave new chapter, more nuanced and exploratory than anything Blur achieved at the height of their fame.

Albarn works best with a creative foil who can take him out of his comfort zone, whether it's African or Chinese musicians pushing him in new directions, the challenge of working with a theatrical director or collaborating with artists as diverse as Michael Nyman and Bobby Womack. Whatever the merits of Blur's admirably solid rhythm section, they were never able to provide Albarn with that kind of spur, which is why he

mothballed the band. So the key is the return of Coxon – and the all-round musical intelligence of his old friend and sparring partner has galvanised Albarn to come up with a stellar set of new songs.

Lonesome Street updates Syd Barrett's whimsical English psychedelia; *New World Tours* has an almost classical feel. The dubbed-up punk electronica of *Go Out* is weirdly and wonderfully off-kilter; *My Terracotta Heart* is one of Albarn's most haunting minor key ballads. *Ghost Ship* is Blur-goes-lounge-pop. *Ong Ong* sounds like Ray Davies meets the Beach Boys' *Smile* and the Bowie-esque *There Are Too Many Of Us* was inspired by the 2014 terrorist café siege in Sydney, which Albarn witnessed. However much you play spot the influences, Albarn channels them into something uniquely, dazzlingly inventive, that leaves you wondering how on earth he does it. **NW**



Janáček Orchestral Works, Vol. 2



Hybrid SACD

Chandos

VOLUME TWO OF Janáček's orchestral music features the popular symphonic rhapsody *Taras Bulba*, along with the overture *Jealousy*, the unfinished *Danube* symphony, plus *The Fiddler's Child* and *The Ballad of Blaník*, plus an interesting reconstructed violin concerto dating from 1926. The performances sound crisp and idiomatic, with excellent orchestral playing, and the Chandos 24-bit recording (made using special hand-made Thureson mics) is detailed. The sound has a nice tonal bloom, but is not over-resonant, sounding clear and open. With a mix of familiar and unfamiliar works, this disc is well worth buying. **JH**



Sibelius Kuolema, King Christian II, Overture in A minor, Two songs from Twelfth Night



CD

Naxos

LEIF SEGERSTAM HAS recorded quite a lot of Sibelius over the past 30 years, and he tends to favour measured tempi in order to bring out every last drop of feeling and atmosphere. The works here form part of the vast body of incidental music Sibelius wrote for the theatre, and while falling into the 'light music' category, the various movements are impressively crafted, tuneful, and imaginative. This budget-priced disc is the first of a Sibelius series from Segerstam and the Turku Philharmonic, and it stands comparison with full-price issues. The recordings offer sonorous and detailed sonics, with natural balances and a wide dynamic range. **JH**



Jean Martinon

Chicago Symphony Orchestra
The Complete Recordings



10 CDs

Sony/RCA

JEAN MARTINON BECAME principle conductor of the Chicago Symphony orchestra in 1963 following the death of Fritz Reiner. The 10 discs in this set bear eloquent witness to Martinon's stay in the Windy City. The performances are crisp and vital, yet elegantly phrased and idiomatic, with technically outstanding orchestral playing. The recordings here have long been out of print, being hard to find and hugely collectible on vinyl. The newly remastered stereo tapes sound excellent for their time, and demonstrate the high standards RCA was achieving in the sixties. The booklet gives plenty of useful info as to recording dates and venues, making the set a collector's dream. **JH**

With 10 discs and an informative booklet this is a collector's dream

AUDIOFILE VINYL



Keith Jarrett, Charlie Haden Last Dance

2x 180g vinyl

ECM



WITH THE SAD passing of Charlie Haden earlier this year, the title of this release proved somewhat prophetic. While these musicians have worked extensively

in the past in bigger bands, *Last Dance* and *Jasmine* (released in 2012) were made by just the two of them alone in 2007. They had been playing together on and off since the sixties, so it's safe to say that they were familiar with one another's styles, and this makes their playing seem effortless yet interlocked in an almost psychic fashion.

It's probably the closest that Jarrett has got to pianist Bill Evans when he had bassist Scott LaFaro in the sixties, but Haden has a softer sound that contrasts with the piano even when it's being played gently. And for the most part the love songs here inspire that sort of playing. The exception is *Dance Of The Infidels*, which injects a bit more pace and shows that both players are in tune at pretty much any tempo.

ECM does not release much material on vinyl so it's a treat to have this record sounding so open and tonally rich on the king of formats, it serves to bring out the nuances of the playing and the perfect sense of timing that both musicians bring to the material. **JK**

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1975

A year in music

HFC hit 40 this year. **Nigel Williamson** turns back the clock and looks at what was happening in the world of popular music back in the glory days

Fashion can move so bewilderingly fast in the world of popular culture that every year can seem like a milestone, but 1975 found music at a watershed moment perhaps like never before. The dawn of disco was upon us, prog-rock was growing flabby and self-indulgent, the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin were taking rock 'n' roll decadence and debauchery to new levels of excess and punk was gathering on the horizon.

It was also a year rich in symbolism as rock 'n' roll came of age – it was 21 years since Elvis Presley had entered Sun studios in Memphis for the first time in 1954. At the same time, it was the year when the last rites were finally read on the sixties, as The Beatles were officially dissolved at a private hearing on January 9, 1975, five years after the Fab Four had stopped making music together.

Anarchy in the UK

Such portents created a suitable backdrop to the first stirrings of the punk insurrection; as did the growing embrace between the establishment and the counter-culture, forces that had once so reviled each other. The new rapprochement was epitomised by the US Embassy in London hosting a reception to promote a European tour by

Little Feat and the Doobie Brothers, the latter of who took their name from a slang term for a marijuana joint.

In America, the FBI was spying on John Lennon and seeking to deport him as an undesirable influence. In Britain, MPs stood up in the House of Commons to deplore pop's corruption of young minds and the "mass hysteria" surrounding groups such as the Bay City Rollers and the Osmonds.

On Young Americans David Bowie embraced a new funk sound and declared rock finished

While the Sex Pistols played their first chaotic gig, a noisy thrash lasting 20 minutes at London's St Martin's School of Art in November, the New York punk scene was coalescing around CBGB in the run-down Bowery district of New York, where the Ramones, Talking Heads and Patti Smith were all making their first appearances. Smith's *Horses*, released at the end of the year, became one of the landmark albums of 1975, causing controversy with lines like: "Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine."

Prog-rock was in retreat, even before the punks started kicking it to death and by 1975, Yes, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, the Moody Blues and King Crimson were all on hiatus. Peter Gabriel departed from Genesis and Pink Floyd were left to stand almost alone as prog's premier flag wavers, finally following-up 1973's *Dark Side Of The Moon* with *Wish You Were Here*. Support, however, came from the likes of Supertramp and Mike Oldfield, whose *Ommadawn* was his most adventurous work and a far more rounded opus than *Tubular Bells*.

D-I-S-C-O

But punk's true *annus mirabilis*/year zero was still a year away and the dominant new sound was disco. Stevie Wonder, the biggest name in black music on the back of a brace of Grammy-winning albums, signed a new \$13 million deal with Motown Records although he didn't release an album in 1975. Instead the field was left to a range of artists who spent the year redefining funk with a synthesised backbeat to create disco-mania.

Donna Summer teamed up with producer Giorgio Moroder on *Love To Love You Baby*, disco's answer to *Je t'aime...non plus*. Gloria Gaynor had a hit with *Never Can Say Goodbye* and the Ohio Players topped the US charts

Inflation hits 24 percent as Britain enters a double-dip recession and Britain's coal miners get a 35 percent pay rise

Muhammad Ali beats Joe Fraser for the heavyweight championship of the world in the 'Thriller in Manila'

Margaret Thatcher defeats Ted Heath to become leader of the Conservative Party

Britain votes 'yes' in a referendum to stay in the European Community

Formula One world champion Graham Hill is killed in a plane crash

CHARLIE CHAPLIN AND PG WODEHOUSE ARE KNIGHTED. WODEHOUSE DIES LATER IN THE YEAR, AGED 93

Films of the year include *Jaws*, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Tommy*, *Monty Python And The Holy Grail* and *Young Frankenstein*

It's a vintage year for British TV as *Fawlty Towers*, *The Sweeney* and *The Good Life* all hit our screens for the first time

The price of a pint of milk rises from 6p to 7p

The 'Yorkshire Ripper' commits his first murder

Russian cosmonauts and American astronauts shake hands in space as the Apollo and Soyuz spacecraft link up

Lord Lucan is found guilty of murder by an inquest jury in his absence and a warrant is issued for his arrest

THE WORLD IN 1975

with *Fire*. Van McCoy went to number one with *The Hustle*, a rare achievement for an instrumental, and KC & The Sunshine Band came up with *Get Down Tonight* and *That's The Way (I Like It)*, while Earth, Wind & Fire delivered *The Way Of The World*, the disco/funk album of the year.

The success of disco was not lost on white acts. After a string of hits in the late sixties, the Bee Gees had fallen on hard times and by the end of 1974 were playing cabaret in Batley. In early 1975 they recorded *Jive Talkin'* in Miami with producer Arif Mardin. By August, the record j-j-jived its way to the top of the US charts and number five in Britain. The reinvented, Bee Gees never needed to sing for their supper in cabaret clubs again.

But the Gibb brothers weren't the only resurrection of the year. Fleetwood Mac, once a mighty blues band in the late sixties, were on their last legs after a string of crippling personnel changes when, as a final throw of the dice, Mick Fleetwood and John and Christine McVie invited the American guitarist/songwriter Lindsey Buckingham to join. He brought his girlfriend Stevie Nicks and the pair helped to reinvent the band as the ultimate Californian melodic soft rockers.

Released in July 1975, the self-titled album, which included one of the songs of the year in

Rhiannon, took 15 months to rise to number one in the American charts; but Fleetwood Mac were on their way to becoming the biggest-selling band of the decade. Their only rivals for the title were the Eagles, whose 1975 album *One Of These Nights* included three hit singles, *One Of These Nights*, *Lynin' Eyes*, and *Take It To The Limit*.

New kids on the block

Amid the memorable comebacks, there were plenty of new names breaking out. Aerosmith emerged as America's premier heavy rock champions with *Toys In The Attic*, an album that included the anthemic *Walk This Way*, a funk-rock antidote to disco, which, ironically, 11 years later became a rap hit for Run-DMC.

Bruce Springsteen's first two albums had seen him touted as 'the new Bob Dylan' and hailed as 'the future of rock 'n' roll', but had failed to sell. In a last-ditch effort to recoup its investment, CBS gave him a gigantic budget to record his make-or-break third effort, *Born To Run*. A year in the making, when it was released in August it was supported by what at the time was the most expensive marketing campaign in musical history. Before his UK concert debut to promote the album, the capital was plastered with billboards proclaiming: "Finally London is ready for

Bruce Springsteen." To which one wag added: "If not CBS has blown this year's budget". It hadn't and The Boss lived up to the hype.

The most unlikely breakout of the year, though, was Peter Dinklage, whose post-*Humble Pie* solo career was drifting into obscurity until he discovered the 'talk box', a strange gizmo attached to his guitar which produced an even stranger sound as he blew through a plastic tube to 'vocalise' the guitar's notes. He used it on tour throughout 1975 and his show in San Francisco on June 14 was recorded to become *Frampton Comes Alive!*, the best-selling live album of all time, until overtaken many years later by Garth Brooks. Jeff Beck also used the voice box on 1975's *Blow By Blow*, on which he bravely moved away from heavy metal to embrace jazz-rock on a landmark album that remains the biggest-seller of his career – and which has stood the test of time rather better than *Frampton Comes Alive!*

Also making the transition to the major league in the course of the year were Queen, whose lavishly produced *A Night At The Opera* included the extraordinary *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Whether one regards the song as a grandiose pop masterpiece or simply overblown bombast, its sheer ambition makes it hard to deny its status as single of

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Blood On The Tracks was a fine return to form for Bob Dylan

the year, although 10cc's lush *I'm Not In Love* arguably ran it a close second.

Yet perhaps the most significant breakthrough of the year was the acceptance into the rock mainstream of a charismatic dreadlocked singer from Jamaica. After years in which reggae had been regarded as little more than a novelty music appreciated mainly by skinheads, two extraordinary concerts by Bob Marley and the Wailers at London's Lyceum that summer helped to turn reggae into the hippest sound on the street and *No Woman, No Cry* – recorded live at the Lyceum – became Marley's first international hit single.

Out with the old?

Meanwhile on the upper slopes of rock music's Mount Olympus, the old gods were starting to show their age. By 1975 the likes of Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones had been around for a decade or more and, even before the punk onslaught, critics were beginning to dismiss the pioneering names of the sixties as old hat. Some 40 years on most of them are still going strong as rock's most revered heritage acts, which shows just how little we knew at the time.

Having abdicated his sixties role as the 'voice of a generation', Dylan's stock had sunk steadily through the early years of the seventies but 1975's *Blood On The Tracks* returned him to form on one of the finest albums of his entire career. His song writing potency reignited by the breakdown of his marriage, songs such as *Tangled Up In Blue* and *Simple Twist Of Fate* matched his greatest compositions of the sixties on perhaps the most compelling break-up album of all time.

In fact, divorce was one of the themes of the year, for Paul Simon also hit a rich vein inspired by marital separation on *Still Crazy After All These Years*. The record subsequently won a Grammy as album of the year and in his acceptance speech, Simon wryly thanked Stevie Wonder – who had won it the previous two years and would win again the following one – “for not making an album this year”.

Dylan followed *Blood On The Tracks* by taking to the road with friends such as Joan Baez, Ramblin' Jack Elliott and Roger McGuinn of the Byrds in the Rolling Thunder Revue, cultivating a relaxed and informal atmosphere that was a conscious attempt to step away from the juggernaut style of rock touring exemplified by the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin. The Stones didn't release an album in 1975, but grossed \$10 million on a 45-date tour, flying around America in a private jet dubbed Starship One, fitted out with a grand salon and a games room.

During the tour, a preacher in Tallahassee organised a bonfire of the group's “sinful” records after a survey of 1,000 unmarried mothers showed that 984 of them had conceived to the sound of rock music.

Not to be outdone, Led Zeppelin matched the Stones step by decadent step with a

By August, the Bee Gees' *Jive Talking* had made its way to the top of the US charts and No.5 in the UK

gargantuan American tour of their own and an even bigger private jet. By now the group were living in tax exile, but they snuck back into Britain to play five stupendous dates at London's Earl's Court. They also released the double album, *Physical Graffiti*, an awesome set from the sinister, thunderous riffs of *Kashmir* to the cataclysmic blues of *In My Time Of Dying* that found the group in its pomp. “What we talk about is creating something as memorable as Beethoven's Fifth,” Plant grandiosely told one interviewer. “Not just something that will be remembered in 50 years but something so mammoth it will last forever.”

In the event, *Physical Graffiti* and the Earl's Court concerts marked the end of Zep's glory days before they were beset by tragedy. On August 4 1975, with the band's next American tour due to start in three weeks, Plant broke both his legs and an arm in a car crash. It was two years before they hit the road again, only for that tour to be cancelled due to the death of Plant's five year-old son.

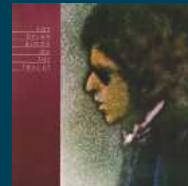
The solo ex-Beatles, having wound up their partnership, followed very different routes. George Harrison was mired in a deep depression and released the lugubrious and aimless *Extra Texture (Read All About It)*. Ringo Starr was mostly too busy getting divorced to make music. But Paul McCartney was active with Wings, releasing the

► 1975'S ESSENTIAL ALBUMS

In case you missed them, these are some of the finest cuts that come out that year...



Pink Floyd
Wish You Were Here
Following *Dark Side Of The Moon* was never going to be easy and it took Floyd two years of angst – but the end results were eventually really rather majestic.



Bob Dylan
Blood On The Tracks
A staggering return to form on the classic divorce album: bittersweet, honest and direct with not a hint of self-pity in the emotional maelstrom.



Led Zeppelin:
Physical Graffiti
Mature and diverse heavy-rock at its most epic. Sadly, Led Zep would never sound this good again.



Bob Marley and the Wailers
Live!
The album that made reggae hip was recorded on an unforgettable hot and steamy night at London's Lyceum.



Queen
A Night At The Opera
Breathtakingly ambitious, full of musical ingenuity and theatrical flair, and rightly dubbed Queen's very own *Sergeant Pepper*.



Joni Mitchell
The Hissing Of Summer Lawns
Musical and lyrical sophistication, hypnotic textures and jazzy rhythms underpinning mordant social commentary.



The Eagles
One Of These Nights
One of those albums on which every single song sounded like a hit single.



Elton John
Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy
A musical autobiography marrying some of Elton's finest tunes to Bernie Taupin's sharply insightful lyrics.



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Led Zeppelin played five stupendous live dates at London's Earl's Court



No new music from the Stones, but like now they made a fortune touring

follow-up to *Band On The Run* as he and the missus topped the British and American charts with *Venus And Mars*. They also embarked on a world tour, which eventually played to more than two million people but hit an uncomfortable moment in Australia when a chat-show host asked Linda McCartney if she was only in Wings because she was sleeping with the lead singer.

Dear John...

In between fighting deportation from America, John Lennon released the covers album *Rock 'n' Roll* but by the end of 1975, following the birth of his son Sean, he had retreated into his 'house-husband' phase. There wouldn't be another album until 1980's *Double Fantasy*, but Lennon did find time to work with David Bowie, co-writing *Fame* on his 1975 album *Young Americans*, which found Bowie embracing a new funk sound and declaring that rock music was finished. "I've rocked my roll. It's a boring dead end," he declared. The record-buying public took a different view and at the end of the year a reissue of Bowie's 1969 hit *Space Oddity* topped the UK singles chart.

David Bowie explored a new funk direction

But the biggest-selling British artist of the year was not David Bowie, but Elton John. He topped the US singles chart first with *Philadelphia Freedom*, following it up with *Island Girl*, while *Captain Fantastic and The Brown Dirt Cowboy* became the first album to go straight to number one in the American album charts in the week of its release, an impressive feat that wasn't achieved even at the height of Beatlemania.

The Sex Pistols played their first chaotic gig, a noisy thrash lasting 20 minutes

On the other side of the coin, 1975 was a vintage year for one-hit wonders and disposable novelties. Has anyone in the last 40 years felt the need to revisit *If* by the *Kojak* actor Telly Savalas, *Whispering Grass* by the *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* sitcom duo of Windsor Davis and Don Estelle or Billy Connolly's (admittedly very funny) Tammy Wynette spoof *D-I-V-O-R-C-E?* Yet all topped the British charts in the course of the year, while the biggest-selling single worldwide (although actually first released the previous year) was *I Can Help* by the American country artist Billy Swann, who was never to enjoy another major hit.

Gone but not forgotten

Finally, we should remember those who played their last note in 1975, among them Tim Buckley; Western swing pioneer Bob Wills; bluesman T Bone Walker of Stormy Monday fame; country guitar hero Lefty Frizzell; R&B giant Louis Jordan; Al Jackson drummer from Booker T and the MGs, who was murdered; Tom Evans of Badfinger, who tragically took his own life; and the Miami Showband, three of whose members were gunned down by loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland.

Those who came into the world in 1975 included Jack White, Natalie Imbruglia, will.i.am and Fergie of Black Eyed Peas, Enrique Iglesias, future Spice Girl Mel B, Lauryn Hill, Michael Bubl  and Mark Ronson. But their's is a story for another day ●

► 1975'S ESSENTIAL ALBUMS

Continued...



Patti Smith

Horses
Brilliantly produced by John Cale, Smith's cathartic debut was challenging and often discordant, but compellingly vital.



Paul Simon

Still Crazy After All These Years
The master craftsman at his masterful best on the year's second great divorce album.



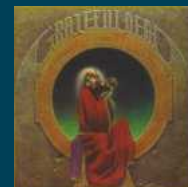
Neil Young

Tonight's The Night
Messy, drugged up and recorded in anguish in the wake of the fatal overdoses of two close colleagues. Uneasy listening at its most intense.



Bruce Springsteen

Born To Run
The Boss' blistering breakthrough, full of youthful zest and enduring power and still surely his finest hour.



Grateful Dead

Blues For Allah
Although famous for their elongated live jams, this set showed that in the studio the Dead were capable of rich invention and sophistication.



Fleetwood Mac

Fleetwood Mac
Rumours two years later would be even bigger, but this was the album that marked the group's rebirth as the ultimate melodic soft-rockers.



David Bowie

Young Americans
The chameleon reinvented himself again as a Philly soul boy with supreme self-confidence and oodles of panache.



Earth Wind & Fire

That's The Way Of The World
The funk album of the year with a disco beat that danced all the way to Boogie Wonderland.



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
ELIPSON

The French Connection

Elipson is no stranger to beautiful design, but as this system demonstrates the engineering is even more attractive still





COMPONENTS

ELIPSON MC-1 £1,300

The MC-1 is Elipson's only standalone piece of electronics and partners the company's bold design ethos with some entirely sensible engineering including Class D amplification, CD, DAB/FM and aptX Bluetooth.

ELIPSON PLANET L £600

It might look like a cross between a diving helmet and a bowling ball, but the Planet L is the latest in a long line of spherical broadcast monitors going back decades and the 6.5in dual concentric driver packs far more of a punch than you might expect.

As a society we make snap, subconscious decisions based on the appearance of things. We prefer the clean well-presented restaurant over the unkempt one and – whether we like it or not – attractive people frequently find themselves benefitting from opportunities afforded them by their appearance. This cuts both ways, though. When you turned the page of this magazine and looked at this system, I would wager that you made a snap decision that it is here because

it looks pretty funky. Spherical speakers and circular electronics are sufficiently different from the norm to be worthy of inclusion surely?

The reality is that this system does indeed look fantastic. It is a heady combination of clean lines, bold colours and a whiff of retro futurism. It is exactly assembled and a joy to use. In some ways though, these attributes slightly count against it when the business of how it performs is considered. A system that looks like this has to be sold on those looks

rather than how it performs doesn't it? This is where looks can be a curse. If those spherical speakers were standard vinyl-wrapped boxes and the electronics placed in some competent but uninspiring casework, I promise you we'd be raving about them.

This is because Elipson has one of the best pedigrees in the business and there is, in the case of the Planet L speakers especially, some sound engineering reasons for their appearance. The Planet loudspeaker is to French Broadcasting what the

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM ELIPSON



legendary LS3/5A studio monitor is to the BBC. It was designed as a broadcast monitor and although it has been built in several different versions, two essential facets have stayed consistent throughout. The two drivers were as close together as possible to aid with time alignment and have now morphed into a dual concentric unit. These have always been placed inside a cabinet that's as close to spherical as possible.

Sphere we go again...

Why a sphere? Those of you who didn't daydream their way through science classes will know that it is the smallest shape for a given internal volume. As well as volumetric efficiency, the cabinet that results is virtually immune to standing waves and resonances. The Planet L might look fabulous – particularly in the odd colour pair you see here (which given that they are available individually is possible as a customer option too) – but those looks are the result of a bloodline most brands would kill for.

The Music Centre MC-1 has a shorter pedigree, but the same diligence shown in generations of Planets is apparent here too. Conscious that its experience in amplifier design was rather less extensive than it is in acoustics, Elipson made a beeline for

the bombproof and highly regarded ICEPower modules from Bang & Olufsen, which means this compact unit disposes of 60W into 8ohm and 120W into 4ohm, which should ensure that the Planets have all the horsepower they need. This power is then harnessed by a CD mechanism, DAB/FM tuner and a selection of optical and analogue inputs.

Like the Planet, Elipson has not been content to leave the Music Centre

The reserves of power keeps the Planets sounding wonderfully cohesive

alone, though. Compared with the version I reviewed many moons ago in *HFC* 352, this example is now fitted with aptX Bluetooth allowing for localised lossless streaming from a suitable device. Additionally, while I never thought that the Music Centre was haphazardly constructed, this latest sample is exquisitely finished. The brushed steel casework is absolutely gorgeous and the MC-1 feels considerably more expensive than it actually is.

In fact, the whole system feels rather pricier than the retail figures would

Above left: Sumptuous build quality makes the most of the Planet's looks

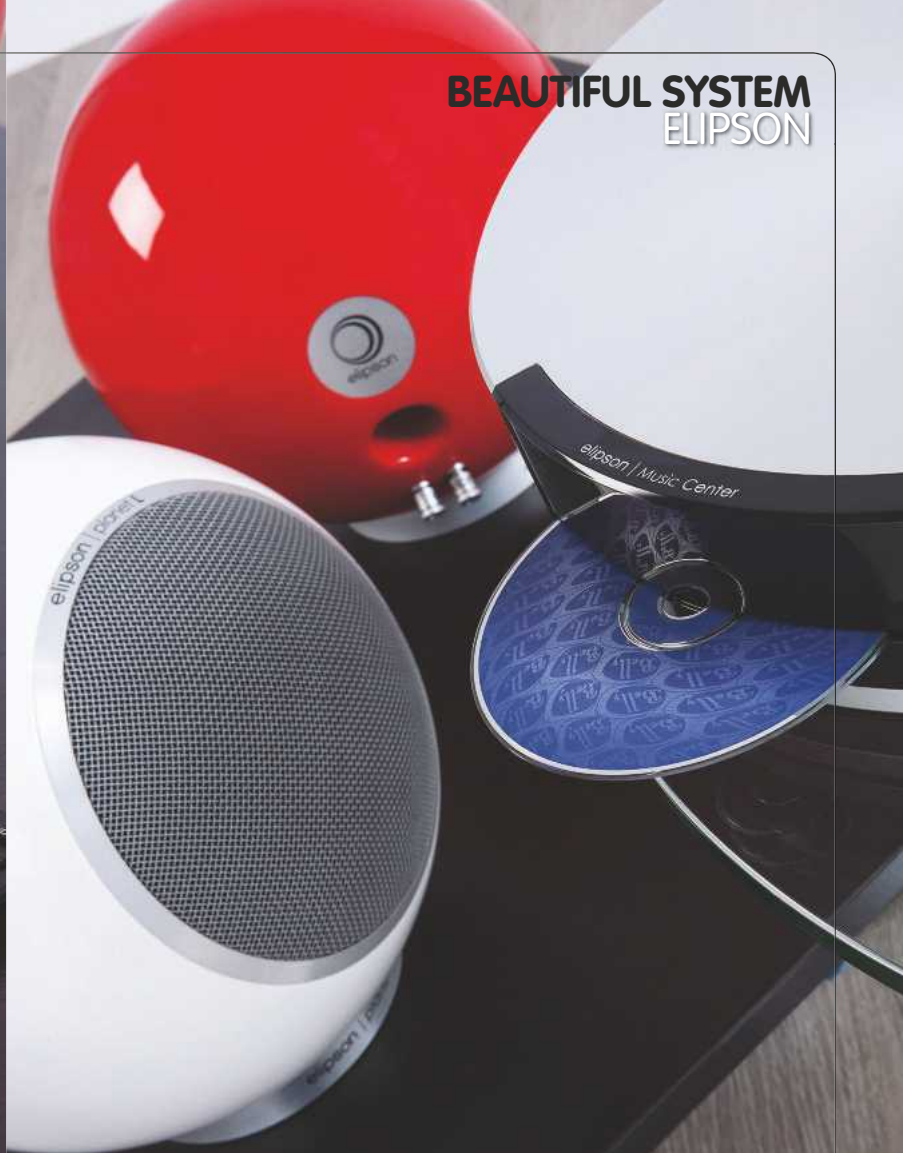
Centre: Connectivity is usefully comprehensive and adds flexibility

Above far right: CD is ably supported by DAB, Bluetooth and digital inputs

have you believe. The Planets have the sort of paint depth and shine that car manufacturers strive for and are immensely solid to the touch. Making speakers spherical for the hell of it is likely to backfire when it comes to placement, but Elipson's experience shows here too. The supplied rings allow for them to be parked on table top or speaker stand and Elipson also makes lovely bespoke floor, wall and ceiling mounts for them too. Placement is, therefore, a breeze and those rather splendid aesthetics should do them no harm either.

A grand day out

To really understand what this system is all about, you need to ignore those sumptuous visuals, though, and simply listen to this trio. The Planet L has been on sale for a few years now, but it remains one of the very finest speakers that you can buy for under £1,000 and as befits something with as many mounting options as it has, one of the most unfussy in terms of placement. All of that broadcast experience has clearly created a speaker that extracts tremendous amounts of detail from recordings and has tonality that is unfailingly believable, but where some products with professional roots can be ruthless when presented with less than perfect



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM ELIPSON

material, the Elipson manages to be almost endlessly forgiving.

Topping this off is the simple sense of fun that this system has in spades. With My Morning Jacket's proglike *Touch Me, I'm Going To Scream Pt2*, the Elipson revels in the sheer joy of the soaring vocals, driving bassline and monstrous guitar work. The accuracy never suffers, but it takes a back seat to delivering the emotional content of the piece.

I have listened to the Planets in a variety of situations and never found them wanting, but there is much to be said for choosing the MC-1 to partner them. The useful reserves of power and current delivery on tap keeps them sounding fast and wonderfully cohesive. Even with volume on the loud side, this duo has a refinement and control that considerably more expensive rivals cannot muster.

How low can you go?

Where this system adds a final ribbon to an already rather lovely bow is with its bass response. Be under no illusions, I love good bass – the deep, fast tight accompaniment to music that is felt as much as heard, but the Planet L while trading a little absolute depth comes unreasonably close to floorstanders for drive and clarity. There are very few other speakers that



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elipson.com

make such effective use of a single 6.5in driver and none of them at such a terrestrial price. Listening to Ramin Djawadi's score for the film *Pacific Rim* is wonderfully satisfying. A full orchestra with a rock flourish on the side isn't the natural comfort zone for a standmount, but the Planet delivers a sensational performance.

Having this ability on tap at a relatively sensible price is excellent and the multiple sources, flexible

The whole system feels pricier than the retail figures would have you believe

inputs and well implemented interface make the MC-1 a pleasure to live with.

The inclusion of aptX is a particular boon. As I've had aptX-capable smartphones for over a year, my latest device quite happily assumes the role of major control point. I can select material from my NAS drive or listen to Tidal and beam it straight to the MC-1 and the performance is on a par with the more traditional inputs. When you come in from a particularly unpleasant day at work to find that the MC-1 has paired with your phone and is waiting to make it recede into the

distance, your mood gets a whole lot better. This effortless performance, impressive flexibility and sheer user friendliness is arguably the most beautiful aspect of this little system. The quality arguments for dedicated separates still carry plenty of weight, but you might be surprised how close the Elipson gets while offering a smaller footprint and those unique aesthetics. Even after the listening is completed, I am happy to leave it in place and continue enjoying the *joie de vivre* it brings to music despite the presence of considerably more expensive equipment.

The look of love

Given how singular the Elipson's appearance is, I suspect it will never fully escape snap judgements based on how it looks, but to dismiss it as a design-led curio is to do it a terrible disservice. What this system is in reality is decades of experience, engineering flair and lateral thinking distilled into the smallest and most convenient platform it is possible for the company to make. That this comes complete with striking visuals and sumptuous build quality is something you should celebrate as a gift that keeps on giving. Sometimes, things that are beautiful on the outside are even more beautiful on the inside. **ES**



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Home improvements

They say the best things in life are free, as **Lee Dunkley** discovered when a fluke rearrangement of his loudspeakers gave his system the boost he'd been searching for

Flicking through the pages of this special issue of *Hi-Fi Choice*, it's easy to appreciate the wealth of products coming our way tempting us with the latest shiny, new and exciting components designed to improve and upgrade our audio systems to take them to the next level. As audio fans we've never had it so good, with an overwhelming choice to help us build the very best-sounding music systems in our home. As an audio journalist I'm in the privileged position of getting to try out more new audio kit than many in my reference system at home, and regularly swap one component for another in a seemingly never-ending revolving door of products coming and going – I am on first name terms with all the delivery drivers – and there's never a dull moment or time wasted in getting the latest arrival unboxed and installed in my setup.

As you might imagine, my quest to hear sonic improvements and achieve synergy in my system and its surroundings borders a bit on the obsessive at times, but I was startled by an accidental and significant improvement in performance that wasn't related to a new component or set of cables and required nothing more than a bit of energy to move the floorstanding speakers.

My setup was installed in its original position when we moved into our home two years ago. As any audio enthusiast will appreciate, earlier thought had been given to where my system would be placed following the decision to purchase

Best of all, this upgrade came for free and was already unboxed

the property and taking the layout of the room and the anticipated furniture arrangements into consideration. My hi-fi was duly installed into position in its new home as planned on moving-in day with components placed in a conventional arrangement on a central rack with my floorstanding speakers either side roughly 3m apart, toed-in slightly and firing down the length of the room.

Listening to the system for the first time in its new home my initial impressions were good but I wasn't blown away, and it sure didn't sound nearly as good as it did in my previous house. Time and a few adjustments might bring greater sonic rewards I thought to myself, and spent the next few months obsessing over amplification and cables to give it the power and grip I felt was needed to really get the best from the floorstanders.

Think of a conventional loudspeaker design and you get the impression that the sound waves are projected directly out by the speaker drivers from the front of the box. This is

certainly true for the most part, but sound waves also radiate out sideways from the cabinet, so that you can hear stuff off-axis and a speaker's sound in a particular environment has lots to do with the way sound reflects around a room. Its behaviour differs at varying frequencies.

Any low frequencies, say below 160Hz, will radiate out in all directions from the cabinet, which needs to be kept clear of rear and side walls. Place them too close to the wall and this will have a significant impact on the bass and increase the amount heard to boomy levels dependent on its design and recommended positioning. Alternatively, one that's placed too far away from the wall will sound thin if it's been specifically designed to be positioned nice and close.

Of course, I have a little experience with loudspeaker placement and the influence room acoustics can have on sound, but nothing prepared me for the jump in performance when a home improvement project forced me to move everything to the other side of the room.

Changing rooms

The new arrangement sees the floorstanders placed a lot further into the room than before and away from any rear or side walls. And they love it! They perform so much better in this free space and are clearly less affected by room reflections in their new position that it's hard to understand why I never considered placing them here in the first place – although this was possibly due to domestic wrangling and not wanting to see them free standing in what felt like the middle of the room at the time.

Having lived with the speakers in their new position for a while has shown me just how much room acoustics and placement can influence the performance of a system. The bass has shaped up nicely with better grip and control that had been sorely missing. The soundstage has opened up too, with an expansiveness and front-to-back depth that wasn't always apparent before. I'm still looking for ways to bring more insight to the sound and happily it's my job to try out as many different products as possible, but the new positioning has quite literally turned my system around, and best of all this upgrade came for free and was already unboxed ●



Loudspeaker placement can make a huge difference to the overall sound performance



LEE DUNKLEY
Lee Llewelyn Bowen

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
LEEMA ACOUSTICS

A design for **LIFE**

Not only does Leema Acoustics make complete music systems, the result of this setup is a perfect fit for modern audio



Like a famous brand of wood preservative, *Beautiful Systems* strives to do precisely what it says on the tin. This means that we feature systems that are attractive to look at or otherwise innovative, bold or at least a little different from the norm. We then also seek to have a complete functioning system – something you could buy in its entirety if you fancied. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, of course, but I think we feature some

great-looking kit, as well. This second part sounds easy enough, but in reality there are some caveats. Some systems feature more than one brand that divide the roles and responsibilities of two very different disciplines – electronics and acoustics. Even when we do have systems supplied by a single company, behind the scenes, I generally wire them up with accessories I have to hand. The system you see here is absolutely in brief as it is built by one company and

what arrives in the boxes is a complete functioning hi-fi that needs no other components to work. So, there's no doubting it's a system, but is it beautiful?

Attractiveness for the sake of it is almost certainly not part of the design remit for Leema Acoustics. The result of two ex-BBC sound engineers Lee Taylor and Mallory Nicholls (who's names combine to form the brand name rather than any deep seated affection for Peru), there is a definite

COMPONENTS

LEEMA ELEMENTS CD PLAYER £1,395

The smallest CD player that Leema makes still boasts a dedicated CD transport, the company's Quattro Infinity Multi DAC and the ability to be connected to two separate systems at once, thanks to two sets of outputs.

LEEMA ELEMENTS INTEGRATED AMP £1,695

The matching integrated amp in the Elements range can be fitted with a DAC board and when so equipped boasts no less than nine inputs as well as a 56W output into 8ohm that rises to over 100W into 4ohm.

LEEMA XERO STANDMOUNT SPEAKERS £1,295

The diminutive Xero is an evolution of the original Xen monitor and shares the same very compact dimensions. Small or not, Leema claims that the Xero can keep many larger designs honest.



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM LEEMA ACOUSTICS



whiff of no nonsense about these components. Leema has developed a reputation for doing things its own way, but this isn't about flamboyance so much as a belief that its approach is the one that yields the best results. The Elements electronics you see here are the entry-level components, but their relatively sensible price point doesn't preclude their specs including some distinctive design practise.

Rear of the year

Take the rear panel of the Elements CD player. This relatively compact chassis features two separate sets of outputs, with a choice of balanced and unbalanced for both. This is done with a view to being part of Leema's fearsomely clever 'LIPS' system that grants the control to use both those outputs to go to different systems or for a seriously purist bi-amping setup. The matching Elements integrated amp is equally busy. As well as a matching set of XLR inputs, it is fitted with three RCAs, three optical and a single coaxial input alongside a USB connection. Building a half-width amp with nine inputs isn't exactly what you'd call 'normal' behaviour, but it does mean that this unassuming little box of tricks is able to handle a truly sprawling system if you really need it to.

The really clever aspect of the Elements is that despite all the functionality, the styling is simple and they avoid being a mass of controls and lights. A small display on both products manages to condense a considerable amount of information into a limited space and the combined volume and selector switch arrangement on the amp is easy to use and saves further controls. The Elements are undoubtedly functional

The Leema nails it in a way that is so much more than just the sum of its parts

– pretty much the only decorative feature is a raised curve on the outside of the front panel – but there is an elegance that's hard not to like.

Leema has let its hair down a little with the partnering Xero standmount loudspeaker. The Xero is a domesticated version of the Xen, the original project undertaken by Leema. Like the Xen, it is very small indeed – a mere 220mm high in fact – but finished in 'gloss zebra', the result is a very pretty speaker indeed. Don't be too concerned by the rather petite size either. The Xen was a design program

Above left: They might be small, but the Elements deliver enormous capability

Centre: With the entire system coming from one manufacturer, the synergy is excellent

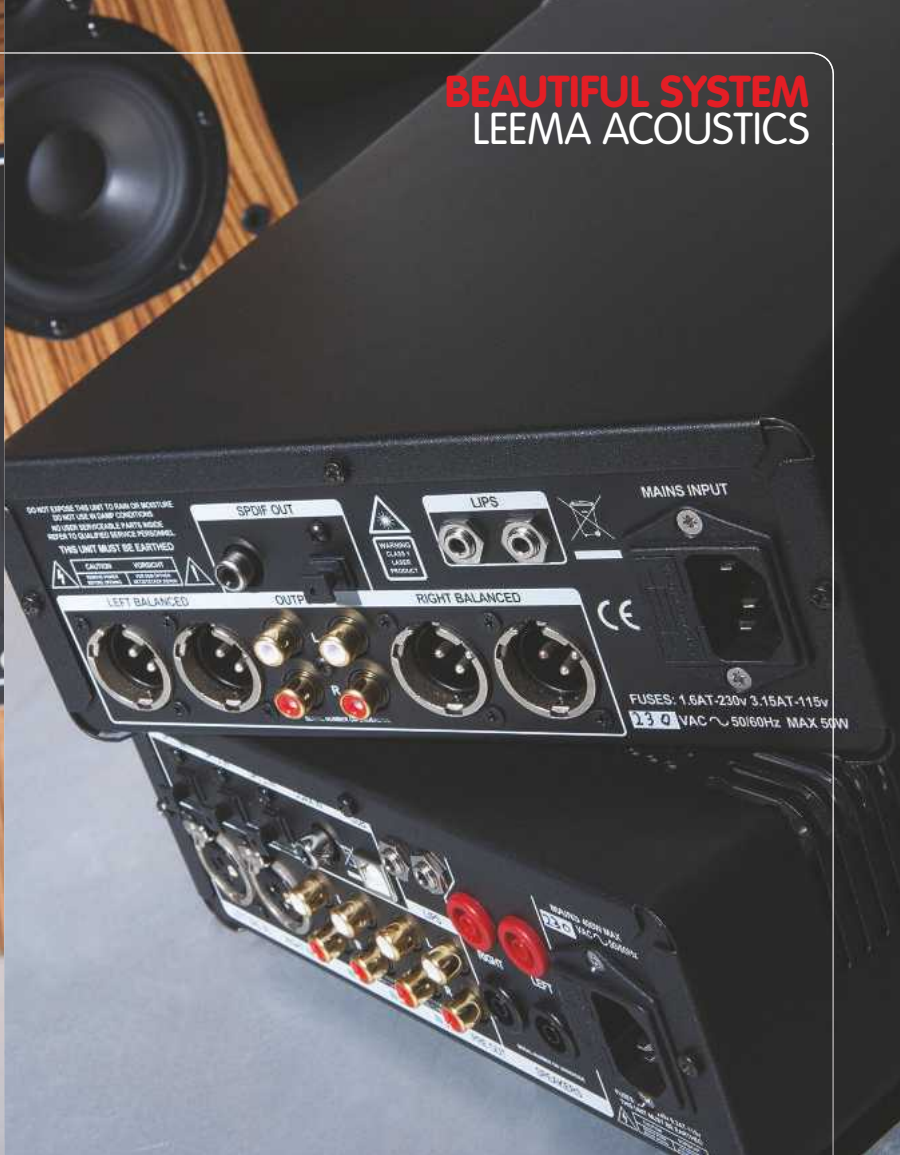
Above far right: Serious socketry means the Leemas can handle XLRs and future expansion

that took several years, but resulted in a compact monitor with decidedly uncompact sound. With this DNA coursing through it, the Xero should be able to punch rather harder than its limited dimensions might suggest.

The final ingredient is the cabling. In the interests of scrupulous accuracy, this is built for Leema by another company, but the Linx Two interconnect and speaker cables are built to Leema's specification and mean that if you are minded to do so, the whole process of playing a CD is undertaken by it from the moment that the disc is placed into the tray to the instant where the sound comes out of the speaker.

Great expectations

The good news is that the resultant sound is really rather something. The expectations you might have for a design that has a 4in driver and a frontal area comfortably smaller than a piece of A4 paper should be kept firmly to yourself until you sit them on some sturdy stands, allow them a little bit of bass re-enforcement from a rear wall and apply a little toe-in. The sound that results is not what should be coming from a little standmount. It punches forth with a scale and impact that you'd expect from something larger and heftier.



A bigger speaker would struggle to sound exactly like this one, though, because the Xero is fearsomely quick. That small driver moves like a skilled featherweight boxer – never still for a moment, but possessing a fearsome punch when needed. The way that the midbass and tweeter are mounted so close together gives the Xero a cohesiveness that is wonderfully compelling and means that the detail retrieval is phenomenal. They might have been domesticated, but the monitor ancestry certainly hasn't gone anywhere.

Maintaining control

In the face of this impressive disregard for the laws of physics, the electronics can initially pass a little unnoticed, but their contribution becomes clearer the longer you listen. For starters, the Xero achieves some of its awesome performance at the expense of sensitivity and it needs a fair amount of power to strut its stuff. The Elements Integrated might only dispose of a claimed 56W into 8ohm, but the control it exerts over the Xero is absolute. The other impressive attribute of the Elements duo is an extremely well-judged presentation. The sound engineering background of the founders is apparent in the accuracy of the Elements, but this



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never steps into a ruthless dissection of poorer recordings.

This comes together to awesome effect with Unkle's mighty *Psyence Fiction* – a disc I rediscovered after many years of it being trapped behind a cabinet at the same time as the Leemas arrived. This is a flawed recording, but one with a set of musicians working with a real sense of purpose. With the awesome *Lonely Soul*, Richard Ashcroft's vocals anchor

The sound is not what should be coming from a little standmount

a disparate collection of samples and loops that can sound thin and disjointed on merciless equipment. The Leema simply nails it in a way that is so much more than just the sum of its parts. The passion is all right there and in many ways so are the limitations, but such is the engagement you simply don't care.

This ability to grab you and bring you the signal rather than the noise is where the Leema truly excels. Subconsciously most of us divide our collections into great recordings and music we love that was mastered in

such a way that we listen through it rather than to it. This little system is one that rubbishes that convention in a way that should have lovers of music rather than lovers of hi-fi (and while the two overlap, they are not the same) in raptures. In short, it manages to find music where others find flaws.

Size matters

If this was all it did, we should be pretty happy, but the icing on the cake is how easy these little components are to live with in the real world. Their tiny footprint means that they should represent no real challenge to any room and not content with working exceptionally well together, that vast collection of inputs on the back of the amplifier means that it can Hoover up any other sonic responsibilities you might have for it without breaking sweat. When you are finished listening, they revert to being compact, elegant little boxes.

This is what 21st century audio should be. We live busy, crowded and complex lives and the limited time we have for something as decadent as sitting down and listening to music needs kit that can deliver the goods with everything we throw at it. This is one company's complete vision of how that should be achieved and my word, it's a very beautiful system indeed. **ES**

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A golden age of hi-fi

David Price dusts down his old seventies records and remembers a time when UK and Japanese hi-fi went through exciting changes as *Hi-Fi Choice* was launched

1

1975 was another country – it all seems so different now. In Britain it was hard to miss the turbulent politics of the period, but it was the music that indelibly stamped itself through me. I loved ABBA and 10cc and who could not resist all that sweet American soul music seeping into the charts from the likes of Isaac Hayes? I was entranced every Thursday at 7pm, sitting in front of my family's shiny new colour television set watching *Top of the Pops*. I was beguiled by Slade and T Rex, getting into The Carpenters and Elton John, and in love with Electric Light Orchestra. Oh for such strength in depth in the charts now!

I hadn't quite got into hi-fi by 1975 – that would come just a year or so later – but I knew what stereo was, and I knew I wanted it despite never actually having heard one. The first album that I would buy was ABBA's *Arrival*, which was being recorded in the autumn of this year. Upon its release, I experienced stereo for the first time and marvelled at the sense of space compared with my Philips mono cassette recorder, handed down to me from my uncle. Stereo sure was for me, and I could think of few more fun things to do than listen to it.

1975 was a pretty good year for hi-fi too. Hi-fi was coming of age, and we were beginning to see new technology and thinking that would transform the audio world. We also saw

Firebrands in flairs epitomised a new generation with a love of fine sound

But whatever it was, there was the sense that things were ratcheting up and pushing forward. The world knew that hi-fi was great, not least because the music was so special and we wanted to hear it in all its finery.

The UK was witnessing the beginning of the 'changing of the guard', with the emergence of Linn Products, Naim Audio and Boothroyd-Stuart Meridian. These were being run by bright young British things who dressed and spoke nothing like the rather formal, old-fashioned captains of industry such as Raymond Cooke's KEF and Peter Walker's Quad. Firebrands in flairs with floppy hair, they epitomised a new generation of slightly 'hippy' entrepreneurs who shared a love of rock music and fine sound, man!

Over the sea and far away, something else was happening that was transforming the world hi-fi scene – the rise of Japan. The country was fast rebuilding itself, and specialising in micro-electronics. It just so happened that Japan really rather suits small things – with its high

some bold ideas that would go nowhere, of course, and some fairly established technologies getting better, cheaper and more accessible.

population density and tiny houses – so the advent of the transistor was a gift horse. Japan also had a new wave of highly industrious entrepreneurs, such as Akio Morita of Sony and Nozomu Matsumoto of Pioneer, who built up their companies to mass produce things in a way that only the Chinese have achieved since.

The difference was that, unlike these days of Californian design and Shenzhen manufacture, when something said "Made in Japan", it was designed there too. The Japanese were brilliant at taking pre-existing concepts and production engineering them with a level of precision that was – and still is – breathtaking. You need only look at the transport mechanism from a 1975 Nakamichi 600 cassette deck for evidence of this. Japanese hi-fi was right on the cusp of destroying much of our own. Swindon-made Garrard SP25 turntables were being replaced by Kawasaki-produced Pioneer PL-12Ds. Venerable British brands like Leak were now beginning to get their hi-fi separates made in the land of the rising sun. Perish the thought!

Leading the way

Sony, Pioneer, Toshiba, Sharp, Hitachi and others were all fast becoming household names – and the Japanese weren't content to copy as they had been a decade previous. Technics had perfected the art of the direct-drive turntable; Sony along with Panasonic and Teac had invented an entirely new tape format called Elcaset, which was an audiophile's dream. Smaller Japanese companies like Nakamichi were taking Compact Cassette to a level that the format's inventor Philips never imagined, and Supex was making stunning-sounding moving coil pick-up cartridges. We saw V-FET power amplifiers from Sony and Yamaha, Beryllium drive units from Yamaha and carbon fibre coned speakers from Sony. It was an exciting time.

Born at this moment, *Hi-Fi Choice* magazine went on to chronicle this, and now those early issues have become fascinating historical records of the huge breath and depth of interesting products of that time. Here's hoping there is plenty more excitement ahead ●



You can blame ABBA's *Arrival* for DP's interest in stereo hi-fi



DAVID PRICE
Time lord

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM
KRELL/PRIMA LUNA/
MARTINLOGAN

Point of **IMPACT**

Valves and electrostatics only do delicacy and finesse right? It looks as though this system missed that particular memo

On a few occasions I have found myself looking at a collection of electronics and feeling pretty sure that I know what to expect sonically. A bit of knowledge about the amp specs, the speaker size and the source equipment used and you're most of the way there. At least you might think so... This system uses a valve amp partnered with electrostatic speakers. What follows should be a laudation to the qualities we associate with these categories, but in practise it doesn't quite work out that way.

MartinLogan's ElectroMotion and Prima Luna's Dialogue have all the attributes you might expect from electronics of this nature. They then go on to augment them with some you simply don't expect. Part of this is down to their design, which in both cases introduces a twist to the accepted design principles and some of the cause lies with the source equipment, but the end result is entirely out of the ordinary.

In the case of the Prima Luna Dialogue Premium HP, the twist is the two letters at the end. The normal Dialogue Premium uses a pair of output valves per channel for power. The 'High Power' version here doubles that to four valves a side. With KT88 valves in place, it gives a hefty (and wonderfully specific) 73W in ultralinear mode. This is a meaningful amount of grunt for a valve amp and offers the possibility of really gripping



COMPONENTS

KRELL CONNECT STREAM PLAYER £3,500

Available either as a streaming transport or as here, with an internal DAC, the Connect is Krell's first foray into streaming and is a 24/192kHz-capable player with internet radio and a choice of balanced and unbalanced audio outputs.

PRIMA LUNA DIALOGUE HP INTEGRATED AMP £3,000

The Dialogue HP is the latest member of the Dialogue family and is designed to offer higher power outputs than the standard integrated. A variety of output valves can be used and these can be used in triode and ultralinear settings.

MARTINLOGAN ELECTROMOTION ELECTROSTATIC SPEAKERS £2,500

The smallest of MartinLogan's hybrid electrostatic speakers is still a pretty sizeable design with an 8in passive driver partnering a 86 x 22cm electrostatic panel for midrange and treble frequencies.



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM KRELL/PRIMA LUNA/ MARTINLOGAN



the speakers by the scruff of the neck rather than cajoling them to perform.

The amount of casual brutality that the MartinLogan ElectroMotion needs to strut its stuff is open to debate given that it has a claimed sensitivity of 91dB/W and fairly benign impedance to go with it, but beyond the bald numbers the ElectroMotion makes some specific requirements of a partnering amp. The twist with the configuration is that like many MartinLogan speakers it uses a conventional driver to fill in the low end that an electrostatic panel can struggle with. Some more expensive models use active bass modules, but the ElectroMotion relies on the partnering amp to power both sections which means the Prima Luna is well placed to use those extra valves.

Completing the picture

The final piece in the puzzle is a digital source from a brand with a different take on design to the rest of the system. Mention Krell and most people will envisage an amp the size of a family hatchback, very possibly with a visible heat haze coming out of the top. This tends to overlook that the company has made some seriously accomplished digital sources over the years, and the Connect Stream Player looks to have been built in the same

mould. It might be Krell's first foray into network streaming, but it manages to look powerful even when it isn't doing anything. In fact you could argue it looks most purposeful doing nothing at all with the giant red standby light casting a menacing glow over its surroundings.

The system isn't one that's going to vanish into the background of most rooms. Given the plethora of valves it uses, the Prima Luna is commendably

This is a system that moves air and hits rib cages with palpable force

compact, but with the considerable expanse of glassware at the front it exudes a certain sense of purpose as well. The MartinLogan is deceptive in that the bulk of its overall dimensions is a relatively lightweight frame, but this is still a fairly sizeable speaker. Everything feels pleasingly over engineered from the flawless paint finish on the rear of the Prima Luna to the supplied remote controls that have almost as much metalwork to them as the devices they control.

So, it's no shrinking violet but we know what it will sound like right?

Above: The HP variant of the Dialogue has the power needed to control the MartinLogans

Centre right: All the components feel exactly assembled and offer useful functionality

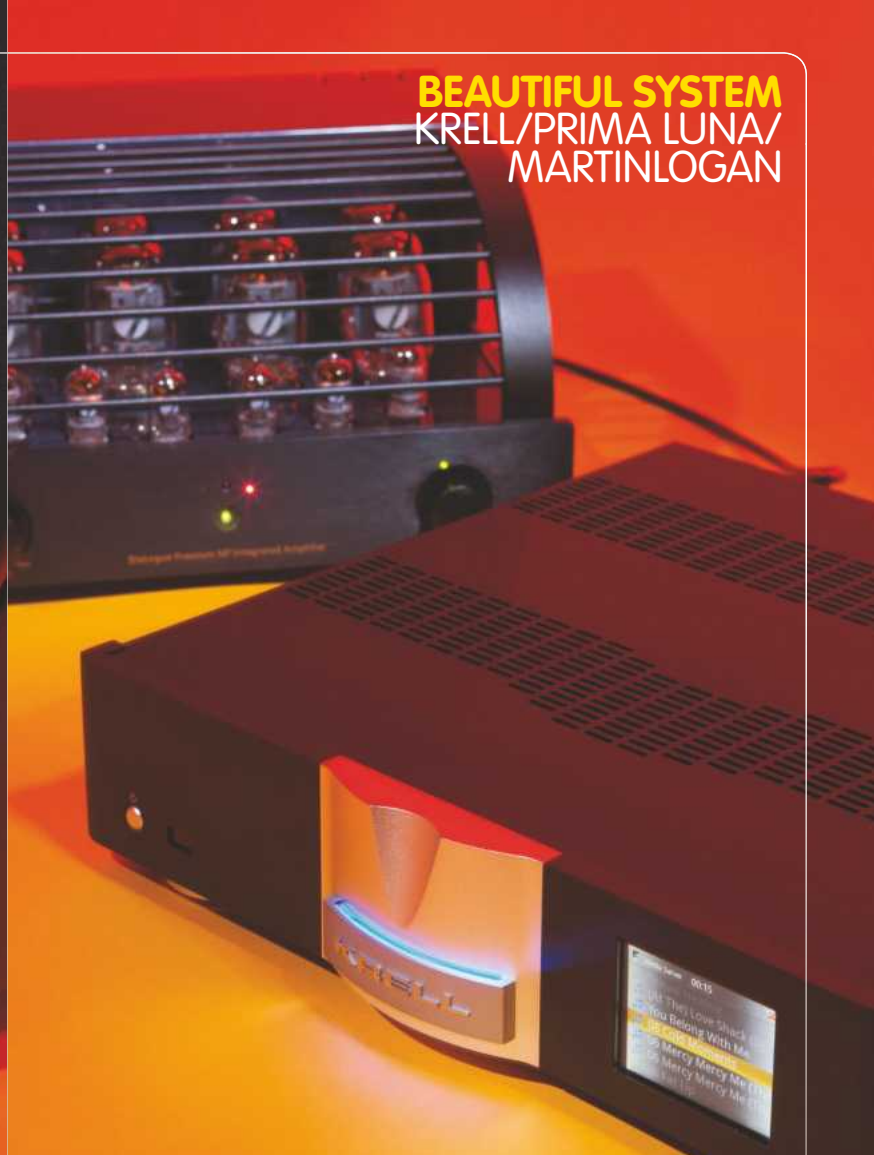
Above far right: The Connect is Krell's first streamer, but the house sound is retained to great effect

This should be a masterpiece of warmth and refinement with a soundstage to die for. With a spot of well-recorded acoustic music, it should be the audio equivalent of a shoulder massage and a nice glass of something expensive. And, for the avoidance of doubt, this system is spellbindingly good in this regard. With its considerable height over a normal seating position and impressive radiating area, the ElectroMotion creates a vision of the performance that even considerably more expensive conventional loudspeakers are left floundering trying to replicate.

Ultra vivid scene

The midrange lucidity is also absolutely superb. *Medicine* by Drew Holcombe and the Neighbours is tangibly and believably real. The decay to notes is an area that valve amplifiers seem to have the edge over their solid state brethren and although it seems minor, the effect on your perception of the performance as a whole is considerable. Combine the expansiveness of the MartinLogan with the vividness of the Prima Luna and you have something wonderful.

If the scope of this system's talents ended here, it would still make a great many people very happy, but the Krell seems to unlock another side of these



BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM KRELL/PRIMA LUNA/ MARTINLOGAN

products that gives this system traits you simply wouldn't expect. Put away the well-recorded acoustic material and reach for the gritty brilliance of Stereo MC's *Deep Down And Dirty* and prepare to be astonished. This system reproduces every low note, every electronic graunch and every utterance of Rob Birch with the determination and enthusiasm of a PA system.

How low can you go?

And not a clumsy PA system either. The 8in driver of the ElectroMotion is kept under a tight leash by the Krell and Prima Luna with the result that it starts and stops with commendable speed and agility. This doesn't stop it producing exceptionally deep bass. The 42Hz quoted roll off of the ElectroMotion must count as the most engaging understatement since Rolls Royce described the output of a giant V8 engine as "adequate". This is a system that moves air and hits rib cages with palpable force. Furthermore, the integration of the two radically different drivers is seamless and entirely imperceptible.

As a result, this system is so much more than a beguiling way to explore some safe genres of music. It has an almost chameleonic ability to shift gears and deliver a level of drive and attack that does justice to albums



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you'd never expect it would excel at. When you are done with going for it, you can turn it down, reach for something relaxing and no trace of this steely determination will impede the experience. This wide-ranging ability and sheer scale is so accomplished that there are very few similarly priced systems that spring to mind that can rival it. It is also completely painless to live with. Every aspect of the system can be controlled by remote and the

This is so much more than a beguiling way to explore some safe genres of music

Krell is completely app controlled as has become the standard for streamers. Pottering through your music collection by iPad wondering what to throw at this ensemble is one of life's little pleasures and marginally harder to do than blinking.

The final treat in this gift that keeps on giving is what happens when you give the system a little hi-res to play with. The Krell thrives on higher bitrate material and the attendant improvements in mastering and dynamic range. The jump in performance is palpable and the Prima

Luna and MartinLogans respond in kind. The way that an album with rough and ready mastering can be flattered while one that is sumptuously recorded can be given all the space it needs is an elegant demonstration that valves still remain entirely relevant in modern audio.

Gift that keeps on giving

Summing up this system in a succinct way is extremely difficult because the more time you spend with it, the more facets it reveals. There is scarcely space to note that the Prima Luna has a wonderful headphone output or that tuning in to Radio 4's excellent *Afternoon Drama* on the MartinLogans is to have an actual stage of actors in front of you. What is most significant is that none of these additional talents distract from one another. You could buy it for the midrange and soundstage and delight in that without caring that it will also rock with the best of them and handles electronica with an authority that serious solid state amps would struggle to match. There is something rather wonderful about how it meets your expectations while subverting them at the same time. You can judge this particular book by its cover, but trust me when I say you'll be missing out on some scintillating plot twists. **ES**

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Tweaker's corner

Not content with splashing the cash on the best hi-fi money can buy, **David Vivian** shares his findings from his DIY approach to improving the sound of his setup

Many moons ago on the back page of this very magazine, I devoted a column to weird hi-fi tweaks from around the globe. There were plenty to choose from and there still are, though since my brief back then was to gently poke fun at the more palpably barmy, I'm feeling a little guilty about the thing I'm about to reveal.

It's this: I'm an inveterate, solid-gone, penny-pinching, can't-leave-well-alone tweaker. Always have been. My first ever CD player was a Sony D50 Walkman. I didn't use it as a portable, but spent weeks experimenting with varying thicknesses of foam-backed table tennis bat rubber that I believed would act as a vibration-damping mat between the chunky Walkman and the thin wooden shelf on which it was placed, just above a more substantial one supporting the Naim Nait 2 amplifier to which it was connected. Bisected squash balls, semi-inflated bicycle inner tubes, bubble wrap sandwiched between panes of glass, speaker stand spikes located on screw heads drilled into the floorboards, creative use of Blu Tack – I've tried them all over the years and some remain in situ and do – I believe – make a positive, if marginal, difference.

Here's a twist on one of the oldest tweaks going that isn't going to break the bank, but can yield spectacular results if my experience is anything to go by. You may have heard of

I add more erasers and at no point feel that I am making a really big mistake

quite a few in the UK. The chain describes itself as the purveyor of "lots of funny, useful things for your home, office and personal care". Think Ikea with a sense of humour. For £2 it sells a giant rubber eraser (choose from green, blue or pink). 'For Really Big Mistakes', natch. Remarkably weighty for its size, it's just about the deadest, most inert hunk of rubber I've encountered.

Daylight rubbery

No one needs an eraser 15cm across, of course. Not just the one anyway. I bought 14, after an initial purchase of two. Here's the thing: putting an ordered pile of books on top of your standmount speaker is an old trick that will make it sound better (and look worse) by adding mass while, to a degree, damping enclosure resonances. Crude but effective. I merely wondered if these freakishly large and heavyweight erasers *en masse* could do a better job. Here was a tweaker's itch that simply had to be scratched.

Still a bit belt 'n' braces? Nothing wrong with that. When I used to assist one respected British manufacturer with the voicing of its speakers a few years ago, I lost count of the times a blob of Blu Tack would be stuck to a bass driver to change its mass, with instantly audible results. Eraser-wise, I started with one per speaker (the Monitor Audio Bronze BX2s I occasionally use, planted, it has to be said, on fabulously heavy, rigid and stable Slate Audio stands). Each was placed at the front just behind the baffle and secured with a freshly cut slab of Blu Tack. To my amazement, there was a subtle sharpening of focus and timing. Nothing that fundamentally changed the BX2's exuberantly detailed character – if anything, it unlocked more of the same.

Over the next few days I added more jumbo erasers and at no point felt I was making a really big mistake. On the contrary, with every addition, the speakers revealed hitherto unsuspected sonic talents that left me frankly gobsmacked: greater separation and organisation, more soundstage depth and width, a faster, weightier, better articulated and more tuneful bass and finer resolution of timbral textures. The final arrangement comprised seven erasers per speaker configured in a sort of matrix with some laid transversely and others longitudinally. And, yes, it all looks a bit strange to say the least. The project seems to run against some schools of thought that mass stores energy and messes with temporal integrity, too. But I can only go by what I hear. The BX2s have never sounded faster or more open. In fact, they sound like altogether more expensive and sophisticated speakers – certainly by a bigger margin than the £28 spent at Tiger. Oh, and you'll need a few packs of Blu Tack, too.

If there isn't a Tiger shop near you, the XXL erasers can be purchased online. And never let it be said that we don't learn from our really big mistakes ●



This is no big mistake, just a simple way to improve your speaker's sound



DAVID VIVIAN
Captain tweaky

Prince of Persia

Roksan's Xerxes turntable is 30 years old, but the latest version and its supporting range looks like it might just be the best ever



Any product that makes it to a decade in production has to be regarded as unusually long lived and even when the more extended life spans of turntables are factored into this calculation, 30 years is both unusual and exceptional. The Roksan Xerxes is the latest arrival into this elite club and while there have been some very substantial changes to the deck in that time, the principle of a turntable

suspended not on springs but on rubber 'blobs' that provide the same isolation with none of the associated drawbacks remains unchanged.

The Xerxes you see here is the most up to date version you can buy. It makes use of Roksan's recently released VSC2 combined phono stage and power supply, which means that as a complete analogue front end, the Xerxes occupies two sensible chassis and requires a solitary plug to

function. More visibly different is the presence of the PUG tonearm. This brand new unipivot with its large 22mm diameter carbon fibre arm tube and dark chrome fittings is at once unfamiliar and traditionally Roksan at the same time, thanks to features like the counterweight system which is clearly descended from earlier Roksan designs. Finishing the deck is a Shiraz moving coil cartridge.



COMPONENTS

ROKSAN XERXES 20+ TURNTABLE **£7,325**

The latest iteration of Roksan's legendary suspended deck gains the all new PUG tonearm and a stunning white finish. The flagship Shiraz cartridge offers truly world-class moving coil performance.

ROKSAN VSC2 PHONO STAGE **£3,250**

The VSC2 is a combined phono stage and power supply offering moving coil and moving magnet settings with variable loading and electronic speed control for both 33 and 45rpm.

ROKSAN CASPIAN M2 INTEGRATED **£1,900**

The M2 boasts 85W per channel in an elegant chassis that features five line inputs with a switchable XLR option as well as a pair of pre-outs to allow for running a pair of power amps.

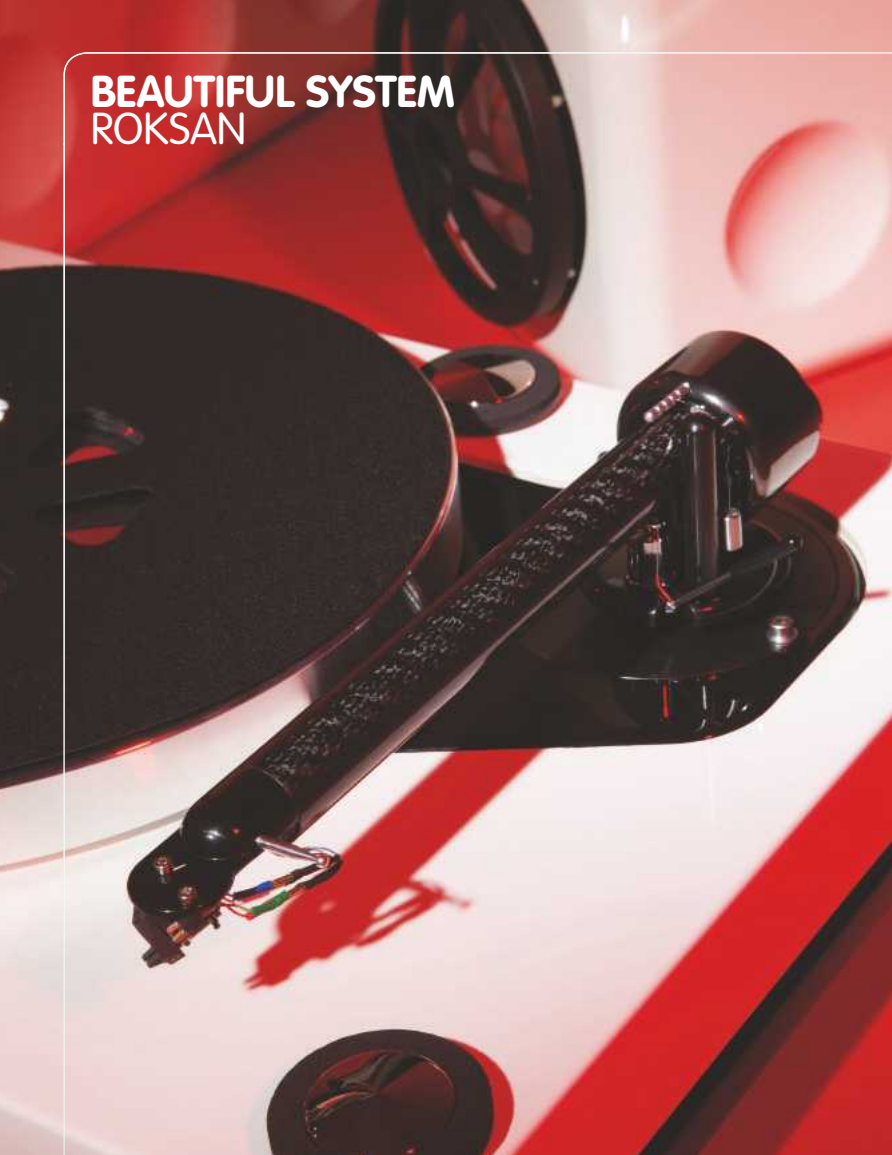
ROKSAN CASPIAN M2 POWER AMP **£1,500**

The M2 power amp is identical to the power section of the integrated amp and allows for daisy chaining of multiple units and has an auto sensing circuit that powers down the amp when not in use.

ROKSAN DARIUS S1 LOUDSPEAKER **£5,250**

The Darius is a two-way standmount loudspeaker built around an Aurum Cantus ribbon tweeter and 5.5in custom-built long-throw driver placed in a rear-ported cabinet on a custom stand (not shown).

BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM ROKSAN



Supporting the Xerxes, is a Caspian M2 integrated amplifier and matching M2 power amp. As a range, the Caspian series has been around an impressively long time in its own right and while the revisions over the years have been substantial, the impressive styling with its slightly retro yet futuristic edge still looks rather unlike anything else on the market. Under the skin, however, the Caspian is strictly business. Both boxes produce a healthy 85W into 8ohm and the venting on the top panels gives enough of a view of the burly power supplies and heavy duty components to suggest that this is an entirely conservative figure.

It takes two, baby

The decision to bring along two amplifiers – beyond the perfectly reasonable position that there are very few situations not improved by having two amps rather than one – is down to the system being completed by the Darius S1 standmount, which works best bi-amped. Its use here ushers it into a rather exclusive club – one of a small number of products that have featured in *Beautiful System* more than once. This large speaker combines an Aurum Cantus ribbon tweeter with a 5.5in midbass driver in an immensely solid cabinet.

Put all of this together and you have a system that looks subtly different to anything else and – to this pair of eyes at least – absolutely fantastic. Since the 'Xerxes 20' version was launched, Roksan can legitimately lay claim to making one of the most handsome and understated turntables for sale at any price. It doesn't draw attention to itself, but when you sit back and study it you end up realising how perfectly proportioned it is. The PUG and the

Delivers raw speed, sensationally airy and detailed top end and impressive bass

new white finish help this along even further by making the Xerxes look entirely modern and yet timeless all at once. I will freely admit to not being the greatest fan of white products, but the Xerxes looks fantastic like this.

The partnering system is easy on the eye too. The stack of three Caspian electronics with their logical and well laid out controls and subtle logo on the top panels are lovely things to interact with, but no aspect of the design interferes with their operation or their impressive functionality. Roksan's use of LEDs to show

Above left: An all new design, the PUG delivers a superb sonic performance

Centre: Comprehensive connectivity gives the Caspian range serious real-world ability

Above right: White with black detailing suits the Xerxes and the Darius down to a tee

different statuses and functions on the Caspians is superbly intuitive.

Topping all this off is the Darius S1. I can imagine serious academics pondering it and debating whether it adheres to minimalism, brutalism or something else altogether. Like the Xerxes, white suits the Darius, helping to highlight the design features and the unusual but decidedly satisfying proportions while using black to highlight the serious bits. This is a system that draws you in with the details and then leaves you entirely satisfied at the whole.

Take it slowly

It has a lovely sense of occasion when using it too. The drop on the PUG is rather slow – it moves with the sort of speed and consistency of dripping treacle, and the gap between dropping the arm lift and the Shiraz cartridge landing into the groove is an exquisite wait. It lands the cartridge with such delicacy that often there's no 'pop' when it's placed on the record, meaning that music starts with no warning. For the first record of the day, this is then accompanied by the input on the power amp sensing a signal and returning to life with a 'thunk.' The whole process is almost organic and adds to the sense that this is so much more than just a 'normal' hi-fi system.



The Xerxes is sonically in keeping with its appearance. No part of the frequency spectrum is accentuated or overblown, instead you are treated to an effortless demonstration of what is on that particular record and how it is mastered, although like a great *maitre d'* dealing with a request for ketchup, it handles issues with the suggestion that everything isn't quite right rather than an insistence.

This means that with Fink's live album *Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet*, the Xerxes delivers a spellbinding demonstration of state-of-the-art vinyl playback. The presentation is effortlessly holographic with a width and depth that is simply beyond digital. It transports you to those smoky and intimate European venues with an effectiveness that I'm not completely sure that video could challenge. The relationship between Greenhill's vocals and his supporting instruments – from the guitar he is using to the percussion set further back – is completely unambiguous.

Talent shows

The Xerxes can only do this because the supporting electronics are talented enough to allow it and while I am aware that *Beautiful Systems* is above such base considerations as pricing, it needs to be noted that



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£3,400 of Caspian amplification does an incredible job of showing what £10,575 of Xerxes can do. There isn't the slightest suggestion of the Caspians being overmatched. The entire stack is so effortlessly homogenous in how it works together that whatever your feelings on the price discrepancy, spending more on amplification really isn't necessary. If anything, the Darius takes this even further. If you like what it does,

Presentation is holographic with a width and depth that is beyond digital

there are very few speakers that deliver the combination of raw speed, sensationally airy and detailed top end and impressive bass that it can. Positioned correctly, the Darius listening experience is like wearing a gigantic pair of open-backed headphones, as there is no real sense of the cabinet, and the driver integration is seamless. It also does a fine job of balancing impressive accuracy with a refinement that keeps everything listenable. Like the amplification that is partnering the speakers, you can spend more but

there is a real synergy to the relationship of these components.

They are unfazed by anything you throw at them too. A lively Sunday afternoon that weaves its way around my record collection, stopping off at such varied points as English folk, French electro and good ole American Southern rock, sees every minute filled with unbridled joy. The Xerxes is so effortlessly understated in the way it goes about making music that you only realise how staggeringly talented it is when it gets taken away. This casual brilliance is everything that great hi-fi should be.

Upping the ante

The Xerxes has always been a tremendous turntable. From its arrival in the eighties onward, it has been carving out a loyal following and each revision sees it get better without losing anything that won it friends in the first place. This latest iteration moves the performance on to a level that puts the Roksan right at the top of vinyl playback. The really impressive aspect is that these improvements have also made the Xerxes better looking and more practical. It fronts a range of products that manages to combine effortlessly with it to make something really rather spectacular. Here's to the next three decades. **ES**

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Let's get physical

As TV, music and literature disappear into a virtual world where we can access anything we want at the touch of a button **Nigel Williamson** wonders if we're really better off

Call it a wild guess, but I reckon that, like me, the majority of *HFC* readers have large record collections. Not much point in having all that expensive, top-of-the-range audio equipment if you haven't got plenty of music to play on it. I dare say most readers also own a sizeable DVD library.

So I wonder what we should make of Alan Wolk's new book, a review copy of which arrived in my mail recently. There's a lot of techy TV stuff that I skipped in *How The Internet Is (Slowly But Surely) Changing The Television Industry*. But I was much struck by his theory that the full maturation of the internet age has, in terms of media, now rendered the concept of consumer ownership pointless.

Wolk's argument goes like this. The idea of ownership is based on the concept of scarcity: if a certain product or service is scarce, it's of value to own it. Traditionally media was always scarce; public libraries, for example, had one copy of a given book and if someone else borrowed it, you had to wait for it to be returned before you could read it. The same with music. Owning media was the only way to ensure consistent access.

He argues, in the modern digital environment with music, TV and movies there is now an alternative to traditional notions of ownership – one that provides access to the entire spectrum of available content so that there is

Despite the cloud, the UK music market is roughly 60 percent physical

no longer a reason for physical possession of any sort of media. Storing everything in the cloud eliminates the notion of scarcity. Theoretically, the cloud makes everything available to everyone. Thus ownership of media is now officially redundant. QED.

In recent years companies like Netflix and Spotify have recognised the potential of this and have persuaded a growing number of consumers that they no longer need to own music or movies. For a monthly subscription fee we can have access to an almost unlimited library.

Wolk concedes that the ability to access any content at any time represents a triumph of convenience over quality. Neil Young recently dubbed streaming the “worst quality in the history of broadcasting” and that loss of audio fidelity will concern *HFC* readers more than most.

But even if the technology develops to deliver hi-fi quality sound via the new streaming platforms, should we really give up the concept of ownership so easily?

Looking around my home which contains a bookcase in every room, a wall of CDs and vinyl and another wall of



video, I realise that if it were all to be placed on a cloud, we could actually downsize, move to a smaller house and free up some equity.

And yes, there are volumes in my bookcases that I haven't read in more than 30 years and CDs on the shelves that I scarcely ever play. Yet the thought of getting rid of them fills me with horror. Does this fixation with owning physical artefacts make me an archaic relic from another age who might as well play 78s on a wind-up gramophone?

To have and to hold

Perhaps it is all now unnecessary clutter. But I'd argue that reading a book is not merely a cerebral experience and listening to music is not merely an audio one. There's a tactile pleasure, too. To me, turning the pages of a book feels like an adventure in a way that scrolling a Kindle can never replicate. Similarly, listening to an LP is a pleasure always enhanced by looking at the cover art and reading the lyrics. That experience was diminished when the 12in cardboard sleeve shrunk to a 5in insert in a plastic CD box. But downloading the record's artwork and lyrics to your device represents a further erosion of the multi-dimensional pleasures associated with the album as an art form.

So there's some satisfaction in the latest statistics from the British Phonographic Industry, which show that despite the number of songs being streamed in the UK passing half a billion per week for the first time (nearly double the number of songs being streamed a year ago), vinyl LPs have enjoyed a surge in popularity and the dramatic decline in CD sales has finally slowed. Despite streaming and the cloud, the UK music market is still roughly 60 percent physical and it would appear that the imagine-no-possessions revolution still has a way to go. It would be fascinating to hear what *HFC* readers make of all this ●

Surely this is preferable to having everything stored in the cloud or on a device?



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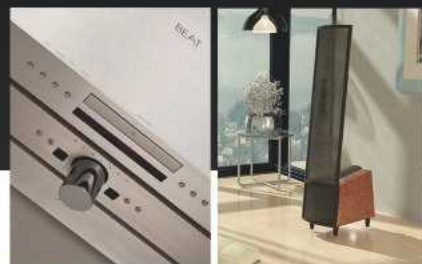
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